

The Semantic Rivalry of *For*, *Fore*, *Foran*, and *Beforan* in Early English

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Contents

1. Introduction
2. Presentations of Old English *For*, *Fore*, *Foran*, and *Beforan* in Reference Books
3. The Structures of the Lexical Fields of Physical Presence and Temporal Antecedence
4. Conclusion

1. Introduction

The objective of this paper is to illustrate the rivalry of Old English *for*, *fore*, *foran*, and *beforan* and to shed light on the development of the word usage in early English. These words are sense-related and can be synonymous to a certain degree; however, they have different word usage and historical development. In Old English, all four words denoted the notion of ‘before’ in various senses. The concept of ‘before’ can be broadly categorised into two notions, ‘physical presence’ and ‘temporal antecedence’. The first part of this paper examines the usage of the words *for*, *fore*, *foran*, and *beforan*. The second part of this paper will discuss the historical changes in the word usage and the structures of the lexical fields of physical presence and temporal antecedence.

2. Dictionary Presentations of Old English *For*, *Fore*, *Foran*, and *Beforan*

This section of this paper examines the treatment of *for*, *fore*, *foran*, and *beforan* in reference works in order to elucidate their word usage, the structure of the relevant lexical fields, and their historical development. The *Oxford English Dictionary*¹ (henceforth OED) will provide us with the etymological/historical informa-

¹ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn, 20 vols, ed. by J. A. Simpson, and E. S. C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989)

tion of these words. *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*² (henceforth CH) and *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* with its supplement³ (henceforth BT) will reveal the Old English usage of the words studied. Finally, the analysis of *A Thesaurus of Old English* (henceforth TOE)⁴ will illustrate the structural framework of the lexical fields of ‘physical presence’ and ‘temporal antecedence’.

2. 1. *The Oxford English Dictionary*

In the exploration of English word senses and historical development, the OED is an appropriate start as the dictionary boasts of its extensive coverage of vocabulary and gives information on etymology and date charts of word use. We will examine the usage of *for*, *fore*, *forne*⁵, and *before* in the dictionary. The following are some of the senses given to the words in the OED that are relevant to the discussion in this paper:

for: in front of, before (of time), above

fore: in front of, before (of time), on account of

forne (OE *foran*): before (of motion), before (of position), before (of time) and on account of⁶

before (OE *beforan*): before (of sequence in space), before (of time)

According to the definition of the preposition *for* in the OED, the word gradually goes out of use after Middle English for the concept of ‘physical presence’ and ‘temporal antecedence’, thereby evolving into the causal *for* only used for ‘causal reference’. By late Middle English, the usage of *for* became very close to the Modern English usage of *for*.

Fore in the OED is given the sense of ‘temporal antecedence’ for the Old English usage. The word only acquired the sense of ‘causal reference’ from c1175 and ‘physical presence’ from the early fourteenth century. Hence the usage of *fore* differs from the usage of *for* as the OED gives *for* both senses in Old English. If we interpret the treatment of *for* and *fore* in the OED, we can conclude that *fore* is more restrictive in its usage in Old English while *for* is more versatile. *For*’s versatility can also be attributed to *fore* being more commonly

² *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, eds. by J. R. Clark Hall, and Herbert Dean Meritt. 4th edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960)

³ *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, Based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth*, ed. and enlarged by T. Northcote Toller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1882);

An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, Based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth: Supplement, ed. by T. Northcote Toller, with revised and enlarged addenda by Alistair Campbell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921)

⁴ *A Thesaurus of Old English*, 2 vols, King’s College London Medieval Studies, Vol. 11, ed. by Jane Roberts, and Christian Kay, with Lynne Grundy, (London: Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies King’s College, 1995)

⁵ *Forne* is a reflex of OE *foran* and *before* is a reflex of OE *beforan*.

⁶ In the classification used in this paper, both the notion of ‘motion’ and ‘position’ are categorised under ‘physical presence’.

used as an adverb than as a preposition. The frequency of these two words also indicates the supremacy of *for* over *fore* in Old English. In Middle English *for* shifted its primary semantic domain to ‘causal’ senses while *fore* merged with *for*.

Foran, as the OED indicates, is only used for the sense of ‘physical presence’ in Old English. *Forne*, which is the antecedent of *foran*, begins to be used for the sense of ‘temporal antecedence’ from c1300 and for ‘causal reference’ from c1440. Hence, *foran* displays an example of semantic extension by adding new senses. Similar to *for*, Old English *beforan* is used both for ‘physical presence’ and for ‘temporal antecedence’ according to the OED. The headword is given the following senses: ‘of sequence in space’ and ‘of time’.

The examination of *for*, *fore*, *foran*, and *beforan* in the OED provides some insight into the word usage. First, *for* seems the most versatile word usage covering all three of the following senses: ‘physical presence’, ‘temporal antecedence’ and ‘causal reference’. Second, *foran* and *beforan* both have the senses ‘physical presence’ and ‘temporal antecedence’.

Although the consultation of the OED provides us with some aspects of the usage of *for*, *fore*, *forne*, and *beforan*, a more detailed distinction of the usage in Old English will emerge from the specialized dictionaries of Old English. Therefore, it is essential to consult the specialised dictionaries of Old English, CH and BT.

2. 2. *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*

CH has two separate headwords for *for* and *fore*, both word forms sharing similar word meanings. *For* according to CH has the three senses of ‘physical presence’, ‘temporal antecedence’, and ‘causal reference’. For the headword *for*, CH assigns to its prepositional form the following senses: ‘before’, ‘in the sight of’, ‘in presence of’, ‘because of’, ‘for the sake of’, ‘through’, ‘on account of’, ‘by reason of’, ‘from’, ‘before’, ‘for’, and ‘instead of’.

Fore shares the same three senses as *for*. As for the word-form *fore*, such senses as ‘before’, ‘in the sight of’, ‘in presence of’, ‘because of’, ‘for the sake of’, ‘through’, ‘on account of’, ‘by reason of’, ‘before’, ‘from’, ‘instead of’ are attributed to the word.

Although not as frequently used as *for* and *fore*, *foran* is used for a similar concept. CH gives the word for its prepositional use the senses ‘before’ and ‘opposite’, from which we can interpret both ‘physical presence’ and ‘temporal antecedence’.⁷ Per CH, *foran* in Old English does not have the sense of ‘causal reference’, which is consistent with the OED. Similar to *foran*, CH regards *beforan* to denote both ‘physical presence’

⁷ Without any citations included in CH, one cannot be certain whether the definition ‘before’ indicates both ‘physical presence’ and ‘temporal antecedence’ or that it only indicate either of the senses as the word *before* in Modern English can mean both.

and ‘temporal antecedence’ as the dictionary provides such sense as ‘in front of’ and ‘prior to’.

The analysis of the treatment of the words in CH is in agreement with the OED. *For*, *foran*, and *beforan* are the only words used to denote the notion of ‘temporal antecedence’ in Old English. However, as we will discuss in the later section of this paper, *beforan* predominantly denotes the notion of ‘physical presence’ in Old English more than it does for the notion of ‘temporal antecedence’.

2.3. *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*

The treatment of *for*, *fore*, *foran*, and *beforan* in BT is aligned with the treatment of these words in CH. BT gives *for* the senses of ‘causal reference’, ‘physical presence’ and ‘temporal antecedence’. *Fore* is given ‘local’ and ‘temporal’ senses. *Foran* is given the sense ‘before’ and it covers both the ‘physical presence’ and ‘temporal antecedence’. BT and CH do not regard *foran* as a word that denotes ‘causal reference’ while *fore* is regarded as one. As for *beforan*, it is given the sense ‘before’, and the citations indicate that the word is used both for ‘physical presence’ and ‘for temporal antecedence’.

Combined with the analysis of CH, the analysis of BT confirms the following in English: 1. *for* is for ‘physical presence’, ‘temporal antecedence’ and ‘causal implication’, 2. *foran* has similar usage as *for*, 3. *beforan* also has similar usage as *for* and *fore*, but is more often used for ‘temporal antecedence’ than *for* or *fore*. In conclusion, *for* is probably the most generic word and *beforan* is the more prototypical word for ‘temporal antecedence’, alongside *ær*, which is not examined in this paper.⁸

Given the insight into the Old English and later English word usage, we will now investigate the structures of lexical fields that *for*, *fore*, *foran*, and *beforan* play a part.

2.4. *A Thesaurus of Old English*

The TOE does not provide an independent index for *for* while there are ones for *fore* and *foran*. This may indicate that the editors of the thesaurus regard *fore* as the primary morpheme and *for* being a variant deriving from *fore*.

In Old English distinction between *for* and *fore* exists, however, according to Terasawa (1997: 527)⁹ the distinction is not always made between the two words. Additionally, as TOE does not provide a headword for *for* in the index, the editors of the TOE must believe *for* is a variant form of *fore*. The OED also states that ‘in Old English *for* and *fore* seem to have been used indiscriminately’ as prepositions and that in Middle English

⁸ *Ær* is intentionally excluded from this study for two reasons: 1. *æ* is restrictively used for temporal sense, 2. *æ* has morphological dissimilarity from the other words examined that have morphological commonality.

⁹ *The Kenkyusha Dictionary of English Etymology*, ed by Yoshio Terasawa (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1997)

these two were gradually differentiated.¹⁰ Although *for* and *fore* are interchangeably used in English to a certain degree, there still is a distinction as the following passage from Ælfric suggests:

[0022 (177.100)] Þa cwæð se casere. þæt hi wæron gesibbe. and for ði spræce þillice word him fore;
(*ÆCHom II*, 20, p. 177, 100-101)¹¹

[Then said the king that they were friends and for that he spoke such words in front of him]¹²

In the passage above, both *for* and *fore* occur in the vicinity with clear differentiation of their usage. *For* has the 'causal' sense while *fore* has the sense of 'presence'. The differentiated usage of *for* and *fore* in ME is also illustrated in the *Middle English Dictionary* (henceforth MED)¹³. MED has two separate headwords for *for* and *fore* with differentiated usage of words. The usage of *for* is primarily causal while the usage of *fore* is primarily local and temporal. From a viewpoint of morphology, *for* would be the word from which the other words derive: *fore*, *foran*, and then *beforan*. As the morphemes of the three words imply, *for* is the word-body to which morphs have been added to make new words. *Beforan* is considered a compound noun made up of *be* 'around' + *foran*.

As illustrated above, the treatment of the words in the TOE compared to other reference works alone implies the possible state of confusion in the usage and the impact of possible variant forms during the Old English period. In this paper, *fore* is considered an independent word-form as the distinction between *for* and *fore* becomes crucial in the later discussion of the historical development of the lexical fields.

For the sense of 'physical presence', the following two sections exist in the thesaurus: section 05.10.04.03 for notions of presence with reference to place and the section 05.10.05.0.4.09.01 for notions of presence with reference to space. The distinction between these notions can be vague, but the former is more specific to three-dimensional area while the latter is more specific to two-dimensional area.

The section 05.10.04.03 includes *beforan*, *foran*, and *fore*. The section 05.10.05.04.09.01 includes the following words: *foran*, *fore*, *onforan*, and *on foreward(um)*. For the sense of 'temporal antecedence', TOE lists *ætforan*, *beforan*, *foran*, *fore*, *onforan*, and *tōforan*, in the section of 05.11.07.03.02. The usage comparison is below:

¹⁰ The OED, vol. 6, p. 23: 'In OE *for* and *fore* are seem to have been used indiscriminately as preps.; in ME. they were gradually differentiated.'

¹¹ Malcolm Godden, ed., *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series: Text*, EETS. s.s. 5 (London: Published for the Early English Text Society by the Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 177.

¹² Translations of texts are by the author unless stated otherwise.

¹³ *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. by Hans Kurath, Sherman M. Kuhn, and Robert E. Lewis, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1952-)

time: *ætforan, beforan, foran, fore, on foran, tōforan*

place : *beforan, foran, fore*

space: *foran, fore, onforan, on foreward(um)*

Beforan, foran, and fore appear both for the notions of ‘physical presence’ and ‘temporal antecedence’. Hence, although TOE provides the structures of the lexical fields, it does not provide the proto-typicality of these words for certain concepts.

3. The Structure of the Lexical Fields of Physical Presence and Temporal Antecedence

This section of this paper discusses how *for, fore, foran, beforan*, and their reflexes constitute part of certain lexical fields. These words have close relationships with the lexical field of physical presence, which is made up of words that denote the state of being ‘in front of entity’, and the lexical field of temporal antecedence. The lexical field of ‘temporal antecedence’ is made up of words denoting the state of being antecedent in sequence. The analysis of the examination of Old English texts as well as the aforementioned findings in reference works is included in this section.

3.1. The Lexical Field of Physical Presence

In Old English, so far as the lexical field of physical presence is concerned, *for, fore, foran, and beforan* are the primary words that constitute the lexical field of physical presence. In Old English *for* has the highest frequency of occurrences amongst the words examined in this study because of its diversity in its word meaning. The word is used for ‘physical presence’, ‘temporal antecedence’ as well as ‘causal reference’. *Foran* and *beforan* are the other prominent words in the lexical field.

In Middle English, *fore* comes into use for ‘physical presence’ thereby newly becoming a member of the lexical field of physical presence. However, the word never was a key player as *beforan* and *foran* were in the field.

The lexical field of ‘physical presence’ sees a significant change in later Middle English. The newer periphrastic form, in *front of*, commonly used in Modern English, comes into use, but only after the loanword *front* established itself in the English vocabulary. *Fore* for ‘physical presence’ was almost obsolete by this time. One can argue there might have been a need for a newer expression as *fore* was going out of use.

Front was used in Middle English from c1290 as an individual word, and in the phrase in *front* from 1698.

Front was originally used to denote 'forehead, face' taking on the sense conveyed in its original language, Old French. MED does not give the general sense of 'front' as we are used to in Modern English. Therefore, the phrase 'in front' is not in use yet. It comes into use in the seventeenth century. From then onwards, *in front of* became more and more prominent in the lexical field of physical presence, before it shifts its primary function to 'temporal antecedence'.

3.2 The Lexical Field of Temporal Antecedence

Beforan becomes the dominant word in the lexical field of temporal antecedence in early Middle English. As indicated from the analysis of the word usage in Section 2 of this paper, *for*, *foran*, and *beforan* were used for temporal notions and there was rivalry amongst these words exhibited in the field. This lexical field sees a major shift in Middle English as follows: *for* shifts its primary semantic domain to 'causal reference' and *forne* (Middle English reflex of OE *foran*) gradually becomes obsolete towards later Middle English. Hence, *biforen* (Middle English reflex of OE *beforan*) becomes a main word in the lexical field of temporal antecedence in Middle English.

4. Conclusion

By examining word usage of *for*, *fore*, *foran*, and *beforan* a picture of the changes from Old English to Middle English emerges. In both the lexical field of physical presence and the lexical field of 'temporal antecedence', *for*, *fore*, and *beforan* rivalled in Old English. However, in Middle English, certain words amongst the group emerge as prominent words in each field.

In the lexical field of physical presence in Old English, the following words were used: *for*, *fore*, *foran*, and *beforan*. *Fore* and *foran* gradually ceased to be used, and *for* became a word of 'causal reference' shifting its primary function away from the 'physical presence'. All except *beforan* became obsolete for the concept, by which, *beforan* became a prominent word in the field.

In the lexical field of temporal antecedence, *for*, *foran*, and *beforan* rivalled in Old English. In Middle English, *for* shifts its semantic domain to the lexical field of causal reference and *fore* became obsolete. While *foren*, the reflex of Old English *foran* started to be used for 'temporal' senses, it soon became obsolete for that usage. The lexical field of temporal antecedence was then left with *beforan* and the word gained its status as a prominent word in the field. However, later with the acquisition of the new word *front*, *biforen* yielded to the phrase *in front of*.

Modern English *before* is a more versatile word used both for 'physical presence' and 'temporal antecedence' than the periphrastic phrase *in front of*, which is only used for the notion of 'physical presence'. As the

structure of the periphrasis indicates, 'in front of' is composed with a non-Germanic word 'front' which came from Old French *front*. The periphrasis 'in front of' came into use in the seventeenth century..

The examination presented in this paper is primarily based on the analysis of dictionaries and a thesaurus. A more detailed analysis of the word usage in Old English texts is expected to provide a different type of insight to understanding the word usage and the structures of the lexical fields.

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