

DIALECTAL VARIATION IN THE LATE OLD ENGLISH PERIOD

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Abstract

The study compares multiple Old English gospels in the 10th century (the northern *Lindisfarne Gospels*, the midlands *Rushworth Gospels* and the southern *West Saxon Gospels*) with a focus on the prepositional triplet *mid-wið-against*. Under the same Latin original, different scribes resorted to different dialectal realisations of these prepositions. Additional prepositional variance can also be observed in the Ælfrician text as opposed to the *West Saxon Gospels*. The result clearly indicates the existence of a marked dialectal variation, both inter-regionally and intra-regionally, in the late Old English period.

1. Introduction

The study of Old English (henceforth OE) dialectology has been hindered by “the scarcity of available material and the dominance of West Saxon” (Suárez-Gómez 2009, p.58). Hogg (2006, p.365-6, 404) also mentions other difficulties such as the lack of enough background information on the texts, the restricted literary register, as well as the masking effect of the focused language¹ used in the scriptorium practice. Also, synchronic comparison of different OE dialects cannot be easily achieved, given that early texts (7 to 8th century) tend to be of Northumbrian and Mercian origin and late texts (9 to 10th century) of West Saxon origin, as Toon comments (1992, p.428), “only after the middle of the tenth century do we find several varieties represented simultaneously”. All these factors explain the difficulties posed for the study of dialectal variation in the OE period.

However, in the late 10th century, we are fortunate to have the three contemporary OE gospels from across the country, all of which date from 950 to 1050: the *Lindisfarne Gospels* (a gloss in the Northumbrian OE dialect), the *Rushworth Gospels* (a gloss partially glossed in the Mercian OE dialect) and the *West Saxon Gospels* (a translation written in the West Saxon dialect). They all correspond to the Latin Vulgate Gospels, a commonly used Latin version of the Holy Bible compiled by St. Jerome in the 4th century, also the definitive and official Latin version used in the Catholic Church.

The *Lindisfarne Gospels* (henceforth *LG*) was originally produced around the year 700 CE at the monastery of Lindisfarne off the coast of Northumberland. In around 950, it was glossed word-for-word in the Northumbrian Old English by a priest called Aldred at Chester-le-Street in County Durham, after the monastic community left Lindisfarne following the Viking raid (Kroch, Taylor & Ringe 2000, p.21; Suárez-Gómez 2009, p.60).

The OE gloss of the *Rushworth Gospels* (henceforth *RG*) bears many similarities to the

¹ Focused language is defined by Hogg (2006, p.401) as a prestigious language that “rather than having fixed, codified forms...contains a small amount of internal variation” and attracts other close varieties to adopt a certain degree of its form. The best example is the late West Saxon dialect before the Norman Conquest.

one of Lindisfarne, but is split between two hands. Its first part, comprising the whole of Matthew’s Gospel, part of Mark’s Gospel (1.1-2.16) and John’s Gospel (18.1-3), was written in the Mercian dialect by a priest called Farman. The rest was glossed in the Northumbrian dialect by another scribe called Owun, done in a way closely matching the Lindisfarne gloss (Kroch, Taylor & Ringe 2000, p.21; Mackowski 2010, p.

3). In the current study, I only include limited analysis of the *RG* where relevant.

Further south in the Kingdom of Wessex, the *West Saxon Gospels* (henceforth *WSG*) was compiled by the Winchester School, the first freestanding vernacular translation of the Latin Gospels into English, presumably completed by the end of the 10th century in Southern England. (Suárez-Gómez 2009, p.60).

The three OE gospels offer a good basis for the study of dialectal variation in the late OE period, with the same Latin source as reference. In the current study, I focus on the use of a prepositional triplet in these texts: MID (a later obsolete OE preposition meaning “with”), WIÐ (an OE preposition originally meaning “against”) and AGAINST (an OE preposition meaning “against”), through which² we can gain a deeper understanding of the OE dialectal variation.

1.1. Gospels, methods, data & results

The electronic texts of the OE gospels are extracted from the corpus of *Dictionary of Old English* (2007) based on Skeat’s version³ (1871-1887). The Latin text I used is the Latin Vulgate from the same corpus, which is consistent throughout all three gospels.

In the count, I only consider MID and WIÐ tokens with a directly corresponding Latin preposition, due to their semantic transparency and availability. Similarly, tokens of AGAINST are collected when there is a direct Latin oppositional preposition matched, rather than across the board, in order to facilitate an easier comparison with the oppositional WIÐ. Counts were made based on different spelling forms of the prepositions, as listed below:

MID	WIÐ	AGAINST
mid, mið	wið, wiþ	agen,ongen, ongægn, ongean

Table 1: Different spelling forms of the prepositional triplet

Beside the raw token counts, semantic categorizations are made based on the prepositional semantics as well. The classification is made between five groups: Comitative, Instrumental, Manner, Spatial and Opposition. Comitative denotes an accompaniment relation in which one participant executes an action alongside another participant. Instrumental denotes the relation between the tool and the user, while Manner denotes the demeanour in which an action is done. Spatial generalizes all space-related relations and Opposition denotes a confrontational relation in which one

² Some irrelevant non-prepositional tokens are excluded from the count, such as *miððy* ‘when, since, seeing that’ or the conjunctive use like *wið ða huile* ‘while, as long as, until’, *wið þæt* ‘until’.

³ One reviewer points out the possible editorial errors in Skeat’s version as demonstrated in Cuesta (2016), namely his unauthorized regularization of scribal forms and the alteration of word space. Luckily, for a study aimed at the prepositional level, such editorial malpractice does not cause great damage to the data.

participant opposes another. These semantic relations are labelled beside the corresponding Latin prepositions.

The token count yields the following result:

In the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, there are in total 493 tokens of MID, corresponding to 310 tokens of Latin prepositions (*cum* and *apud*), with an additional 180 tokens in OE matching a Latin dative/ablative or a non-prepositional phrase. 3 additional tokens appear in the double gloss and are excluded in the count due to their complicated nature (see discussions in Pons-Sanz 2016). In terms of semantic classifications, I label the Latin preposition APUD ‘at, before’ as spatial and CUM ‘with’ as comitative.

<i>Lindisfarne Gospels</i>	Latin Vulgate	
MID	CUM ‘with’	APUD ‘at, before’
310	273	37
Semantics	comitative	spatial
%	88%	12%

Table 2: Latin Source Prepositions to *LG*’s MID

As for WIÐ, 28 tokens are found exclusively corresponding to a Latin preposition without a double gloss in the *LG*. There are 12 additional tokens of WIÐ matching a Latin adverb *usque* (‘until’), which are also excluded from the count. Two Latin oppositional prepositions, *adversus* ‘against’ and *contra* ‘against’, are found in the correspondence.

<i>Lindisfarne Gospels</i>	Latin Vulgate	
WIÐ	ADVERSUS ‘against’	CONTRA ‘against’
28	18	10
Semantics	opposition	
%	100%	

Table 3: Latin Source Prepositions to *LG*’s WIÐ

From Table 2 and 3, we can tell that *LG*’s MID was prototypically used as a comitative preposition while WIÐ as an oppositional one, as reflected in the Latin correspondence.

In the *West Saxon Gospels*, however, different patterns of usage can be discerned. Apart from 139 additional tokens of MID corresponding to a dative/ablative or no source context, I counted a total of 292 tokens of MID corresponding to the Latin *cum*, *apud*, *ex*, *in*, *ab* and *sub*.

<i>WSG</i>	Latin Vulgate					
MID	CUM ‘with’	APUD ‘at’	IN ‘in’	EX ‘out of’	SUB ‘under’	AB ‘by’
292	249	29	11	1	1	1
Semantics	comitative	spatial	instrumental/manner			
%	85.2%	10%	4.8%			

Table 4: Latin Source Prepositions to *WSG*’s MID

Some glossed examples are illustrated below:

(1)

MID-IN

LATIN: *Domine, si percutimus in gladio?*
WSG: *Drihten, slea we mid swurde?*
Lord whether strike we with sword

‘Lord, should we smite with a sword?’ (Luke 22:49)

(2)

MID-EX

LATIN: *emerunt ex illis agrum figuli*
they-bought from them field of-potter
WSG: *gebohton hig ænne æcyr mid þam feo tigylwyrhtena*
bought they one acre with the wealth of-potter

‘They bought with that (money) a field of a potter’ (Matthew 27.7)

(3)

MID-AB

LATIN: *Cum autem videritis circumdari ab exercitu Jerusalem*
when also you-see surrounded by army Jerusalem
WSG: *Donne ge geseoð Hierusalem mid here betrymede*
when you see Jerusalem by army surrounded

‘But when ye shall see Jerusalem be environed with an army’ (Luke 21:20)

(4)

MID-SUB

LATIN: *qui devorant domos viduarum sub obtentu prolixæ orationis*
that devour houses widow’s under pretended extensive prayer
WSG: *Pa þe wudewena hus forswelgath mid heora langsuman gebede*
those who widows-of house devour with their lengthy prayer

‘...which devour the houses of widows under the colour of long prayer’
(Mark 12:40)

In terms of WID in the *WSG*, apart from 10 additional tokens corresponding to a Latin dative/ablative or no source, the rest of 48 tokens corresponding to a Latin preposition are respectively labelled as spatial (proximity), opposition and comitative. An unexpected matchup of WID to the canonically MID-associated Latin preposition CUM can be observed in the *WSG*, counting up to 20.8% of total occurrences. This is a marked difference from its Northern counterpart.

<i>WSG</i>	Latin Vulgate								
WID	SECUS 'beside'	CIRCA 'beside'	JUXTA 'near'	IN 'in'	A/AB 'at, of'	DE 'of'	APUD 'at'	AD 'to'	CUM 'with'
48	18	2	8	3	3	2	1	1	10
Semantics	spatial (proximity)			opposition				spatial	comitative
%	58.4%			18.8%				2%	20.8%

Table 5: Latin Source Prepositions to *WSG* WID

Some glossed examples are illustrated below:

(5)

WID-IN

LATIN: *Si autem peccaverit in te frater tuus, vade*
if also sins in thee brother thy go

WSG: gyf þin broþor syngað wið þe, ga
if thy brother sins against thee go

‘But if thy brother sins against thee, go.’ (Matthew 18:15)

(6)

WID-AB

LATIN: *Videte, et cavete ab omni avaritia*

WSG: gymað & warniað wið ælce gytsunge
regard and beware against all covetousness

‘See ye, and beware of all covetousness.’ (Luke 12:15)

(7)

WID-DE

LATIN: *Et audientes decem, indignati sunt de duobus fratribus.*
And hearing ten angry were of two brethren

WSG: Þa ða tyn leorningnihtas gebulgon with þa twegen gebrothru
then the ten disciples became-angry with the two brethren

‘And upon hearing, the ten had indignation of the two brethren.’ (Matthew 20:24)

(8)

WID-APUD

LATIN: *et hic diffamatus est apud illum quasi dissipasset bona ipsius*
and this maligned was at him as wasted goods his

WSG: wearð wið hine forwreged swylce he his god forspilde
became against him denounced as he his goods wasted

‘And this was accused of him, as he had wasted his good.’ (Luke 16:1)

The *WSG* scribe only used 19% of all *WIÐ* tokens for oppositional use, leaving its main function to be of spatial proximity (58%). This is rather different from the northern practice. Under cross reference, we can note that the Lindisfarne glossator consistently used other proximity prepositions, such as *æt* ‘at’ or *neh* ‘near, nigh’ in contexts where the West Saxon scribe used *WIÐ*⁴, as listed in Table 6 (reference from the *Wycliffe’s Bible* is added):

Latin Prep.	<i>WSG</i> Prep.	<i>RG</i> Prep.	<i>LG</i> Prep.	Wycliffe Prep.	Number of occurrences across whole text
secus	wið	by	at	‘beside’	3
secus	wið	by	nigh	‘beside’	1
secus	wið	by	at/nigh	‘beside’	2
juxta	wið	by	at	‘beside’	1
juxta	wið	by	at/nigh	‘beside’	1
juxta	wið	/	nigh	‘beside’	3
juxta	wið	/	at/nigh	‘beside’	3
juxta	wið	/	at	‘beside’	1
secus	wið	/	at	‘beside’	7
secus	wið	/	nigh	‘beside’	3
secus	wið	/	at/nigh	‘beside’	1

Table 6: Proximity Prepositions in various OE Gospels

Sentence (9) gives a typical example of the diverse uses of proximity prepositions across three OE gospels, with the northern preference for *at/nigh*, Midlands for *by* and the southern for *wið*:

(9)

LATIN: *Et cum transisset iesus uenit iterum secus mare galileae*
 LG: *miððy oferfoerde ðona ðe hælend cuom æt l neh sæ galilea*
 WSG: *ða se hælend þanon ferde eft, he com wiþ ða Galileiscean sæ*
 RG: *& þa þonan foerde se hælend, cuom æft be sæ galilea*

‘And when Jesus had passed from thence, he came beside the sea of Galilee’
 (Matthew 15:29)

⁴ In the Mercian chapters of the *Rushworth Gospels*, we can also find the use of a more transparent spatial preposition *be* ‘by’ by the Mercian scribe.

This reflects a North-South divide in WID’s prepositional semantics. We can confirm this by a Fisher exact test for the region and the use of oppositional WID.

	Opposition	Non-opposition
Northern WID	28	0
Southern WID	9	39

Table 7: Fisher exact test for region and oppositional WID

The Fisher exact test statistic value is < 0.00001 . The result is significant at $p < .05$. There is indeed a significant association between the use of oppositional WID and the region. The North has a strong tendency to use oppositional WID, while it is not the case in the South.

In terms of the behavior of MID, there seems not to be a marked difference, since the token distribution looks rather similar. We can further verify it by a chi-square test:

	Comitative	Non-comitative
Northern MID	273	37
Southern MID	249	43

Table 8: Chi-square test for region and comitative MID

Based on the distribution in Table 8, a chi-square test of independence shows that there is no significant association between the use of comitative MID and their regional provenance, $X^2(1, N = 602) = 1.0162$, $p = .313$. Therefore, the semantics of MID is consistent across regions.

The Latin Vulgate Gospels are the *vorlage* used by both the northern and southern scribes. Given the vital importance and the high status of the Holy Scripture in medieval religious life, we may expect the glossing or translation of the gospels into the vernacular to be done in an extremely careful and truthful fashion (see Taylor 2008). The comparison yields some interesting insights. The use of MID is highly homogeneous across the northern and southern version, with a strong correspondence to the Latin comitative preposition CUM. WID, on the other hand, has a diverged semantics across regions. Northern WID, following from its Germanic root, mainly expresses opposition, while the majority of the southern WID are used to express spatial proximity, as the Latin evidence suggests. AGAINST is a popular alternative used in the *WSG* to express opposition. It will be dealt with in detail in the next section.

2. OE AGAINST

A cross-examination between the Lindisfarne oppositional WID and its West Saxon counterpart reveals a major difference: the *WSG* scribe prefers AGAINST as the oppositional preposition while the *LG* scribe consistently uses WID. While Latin *adversus* and *contra* always match the *LG* oppositional WID, they don’t always match AGAINST in the *WSG* version.

We can summarize a corresponding pattern in Table 9.

<i>Lindisfarne Gospels</i>	<i>Latin Vulgate</i>	<i>West Saxon Gospels</i>	Occurrence times
WIÐ	<i>adversus</i>	AGAINST	17
WIÐ	<i>adversus</i>	dative/ablative	1
WIÐ	<i>contra</i>	AGAINST	8
WIÐ	<i>contra</i>	<i>at, on</i>	2

Table 9: Lindisfarne oppositional WIÐ and *WSG* AGAINST

As can be seen from Table 9, most of the Lindisfarne WIÐ corresponds to the West Saxon AGAINST (besides other marginal cases of dative/ablative use or alternative prepositions like *on* or *at*). The match between the Lindisfarne WIÐ and West Saxon AGAINST is mostly very neat. Sentence (10) below represents a good example.

(10)

LATIN: *et omne concilium quaerebant **aduersum** iesum testimonium*

LG: *all þæt somnung sohton **wið** ðone hælend cyðnisse*

WSG: *þa heahsacerdas sohton eall geþeagt tale **agen** þone hælend*

‘And all the council sought witnessing against Jesus...’ (Mark 14:55)

However, it is also note-worthy that AGAINST is not the sole oppositional device used in the *WSG*, since there still exists 8 tokens of oppositional WIÐ, corresponding to the Latin dative/ablative or *a, ab* and *in* (see Table 10). The *LG* and Latin oppositional correspondence looks rather neat, while the West Saxon version looks like a freer translation derived from the context.

WSG Prep.	wið	wið	wið	wið	wið	wið	wið	wið
Latin Prep.	DAT	a	ab	de	a	in	in	/
LG Prep.	DAT	from	from	of	from	in	in	/

Table 10: West Saxon oppositional WIÐ and its counterpart

As can also be seen from Table 11 below, the Lindisfarne glossator Aldred also employed AGAINST on several occasions, sometimes as a supplementary double gloss. In 2 out of 6 times (33.33%) was AGAINST double glossed after WIÐ and once was it double glossed in front of *togægnes*, a synonymous spatial preposition. Pons-Sanz (2016) shows that Aldred tends to place the interpretamentum which most commonly renders the Latin lemma in the first position of the double gloss, albeit not consistently. The examples of WIÐ and AGAINST double gloss seem to suggest that both were acceptable for the Northumbrian native speakers, but WIÐ might be deemed as a closer interpretation to the Latin *contra*.

Chapter	LG	Latin Vulgate	Wycliffe Bible	WSG	Meaning
Mark 12:41	<i>sætt se hælend wið ðæs dores</i> l ongægn	<i>Et sedens iesus contra gazophilacium</i>	Jesus sitting against the treasury	<i>Ða sæt se hælend ongen þone tollsceamol</i>	(spatial) opposition
Luke 8:26	<i>ðio is fora ongen galilea</i>	<i>quae est contra galilaeam</i>	that is against Galilee	<i>Þæt is foran ongen⁵ Galileam</i>	(spatial) opposition
Luke 21:10	<i>arisað cynn wið ongen cynne, & ric wið ric</i>	<i>gens contra gentem et regnum aduersus regnum</i>	Folk shall rise against folk, kingdom against kingdom	<i>þeod arist agen þeode, rice agen rice</i>	(confrontational) opposition
John 12:18	<i>forða l foreðon & ongen l togægnes cuom him ðe here</i>	<i>propterea et obuiam uenit ei turba</i>	And therefore the people came, and met with him	<i>forði him com seo menio ongean</i>	(spatial) opposition
John 13:19	<i>he ahefð l ongen mec hel his.</i>	<i>leuabit contra me calcaneum suum</i>	shall raise his heel against me	<i>ahefþ hys ho ongean me</i>	(spatial) opposition
John 15:25	<i>buta oðrum yfle ongen</i>	<i>quia odio me habuerunt gratis</i>	they had me in hate without cause	<i>Þæt hi hatedon me buton gewyrhton</i>	(confrontational) opposition

Table 11: AGAINST in the LG and its counterparts

Moreover, Table 11 shows that AGAINST in the LG can fulfil both spatial (as in “sit against the treasury”) and confrontational opposition (as in “folk shall rise against folk”). In 4 out of 6 times (66.66%) in the Lindisfarne gloss, AGAINST was used as a spatial opposition, and only twice (33%) was it used (once also preceded by a WID) as confrontational opposition. Also, in 4 out of 6 times (66.66%) AGAINST matches the Latin source preposition *contra*, the other two tokens arising from no source context and the Lindisfarne phrase in John 15:25 was in fact one of the multiple glosses to the Latin phrase *quia odio me habuerunt gratis*. Therefore, AGAINST was certainly used by Aldred in diverse ways.

The choice of different preferred prepositions can certainly be a clear regional marker in the OE time. According to Kitson’s study (1995, p.84-88) of Anglo-Saxon land charters, a three-way contrast between *on/andlang* in the West Saxons, *in/æfter* in the Mercian and *to/be* in the “old south-east” (in Kitson’s term) can be observed in the OE cartulary practice. This again testifies to the different regional variations in prepositional use, the same as the AGAINST-WID divide here.

⁵ *Foran ongen/ongægn* is a common fixed collocation that equals *ongen/ongægn*.

3. *Ælfrician use*

To examine if such preference was consistent in the south, I compare the *West Saxon Gospels* to another West Saxon text from the late 10th century, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*. This text was written and completed by Ælfric of Eynsham by 998 (Scheil 2014, p.5). Ælfric's language is often thought of as the fine specimen of the late West Saxon dialect used in the Winchester School (Gneuss 1972, p.75). Analysis of an extract of 56 WID tokens from *Ælfric's Lives of Saints* shows that 80% of WID tokens therein express opposition, as shown in Table 12. This is in line with the result observed in the *LG* and *RG*.

<i>Ælfric's Lives of Saints</i>		
WID		
comitative	5	8.93%
instrumentality	1	1.78%
manner	0	0.00%
opposition	45	80.36%
spatial	5	8.93%
TOTAL	56	100.00%

Table 12: Semantics of WID tokens in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*

Therefore, the employment of AGAINST as the chief oppositional preposition rather than WID is possibly a *WSG* peculiarity. Gneuss (1972, p.80) notes the difference in the choice of vocabulary between the traditional Winchester School and the *West Saxon Gospels*. It is likely that this difference represents an intra-dialectal variation within the traditionally-deemed uniform late West Saxon bloc.

The late West Saxon English, albeit overall uniform, could still reflect a certain degree of individualism. Gneuss (1972, p.79-80) carefully points out the difference between Wulfstan's vocabulary and that used by the classic Winchester School. As for Ælfric, Kitson (1993, p.7, 11, 24) pinpoints his possible dialect origin as S Gloucs/N. Wilts/N. Somerset, different from the language used in the translation of the *West Saxon Gospels*, "Ælfric's literary dialect was based on the speech of north-west Wessex, in contradistinction to the Winchester area". Another study by Takeuchi (1998) shows that Ælfric made use of some peculiar idiolect (such as the use of rare verb forms *andwyrðan* and *forgyfan*) deviating from other West Saxon writers, possibly for an archaic style. Therefore, the extensive employment of oppositional WID in Ælfric's works could either reflect an archaic style or his personal north-west Wessex dialect (or patois). Kitson (1993, p. 20) states that "standard Mercian was of considerably more importance as a *schriftsprache* in the ninth century than was standard West Saxon in the tenth century", and the north-west patois spoken by Ælfric could be under remaining influence from the Mercian dominance in the last century, therefore still to be felt in his peculiar use of the prepositions.

4. *Conclusion*

The study of the Old English gospels shows that the use of MID is consistent across regions, yet there exists a preference for oppositional WID in the *Lindisfarne Gospels* and a preference for oppositional AGAINST in the *West Saxon Gospels*. The North-

South divide is verified statistically. As Suárez-Gómez (2008: 58) comments that “there should have been intra-dialectal variation within West Saxon”, there indeed exists a difference between Ælfrician use of WID and that in the *West Saxon Gospels*. The Ælfrician WID bears more similarity to the Mercian/Northumbrian region, possibly reflecting an intra-dialectal variation within the Winchester School. All evidence points to the existence of a marked dialectal variation, both inter-regionally and intra-regionally, in the late Old English period.

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