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Lability in Old English Verbs: Chronological and Textual Distribution

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Abstract: Present-Day English has an unusually high number of labile verbs, such as *melt* or *burn*, both cross-linguistically and with respect to genetically related languages. Comparison among early Germanic languages has allowed researchers to detect an incipient favouring of labile coding already in Old English, where it is more frequent than in any other language of this group (Hermodsson 1952) and replaces causative coding in a considerable proportion of former causative verb pairs (van Gelderen 2011; García García 2020). This article attempts to map the chronological and textual distribution of labile verbs between the seventh and the eleventh centuries CE in order to explore how lability develops throughout the Old English period. Old English labile verbs coming from Germanic causative oppositions are the sample on which we base our study. The choice ensures that the verbs in question were originally not labile and underwent a process of labilization in (pre-)Old English. Some of the questions addressed in the study are: Can a tendency towards labilization in Old English be confirmed by internal evidence, as it arguably can by external comparison with other Germanic languages? Can an increase in lability be detected in English before French influence was effective? Does it show any restrictions by genre or individual text?

Key terms: labile verbs, valency, causatives, Old English, diachrony, morpho-syntax, corpus studies

1 Introduction

There are different ways to code noncausal/causal alternations of the type *laugh* vs. *make* (sb.) *laugh* or *melt* (intrans.) vs. *melt* (sth., trans.) cross-linguistically; for thorough typological surveys on this issue, see Dixon (2000), Nichols, Peterson

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and Barnes (2004) and Haspelmath et al. (2014). We adhere to Haspelmath's terminology (1993) in the succinct outline that follows. 'Causative coding' is found when the causal verb is derived from a noncausal base verb, as in the following Japanese pair:

- (1) basic verb (noncausal meaning) *kawak-u* 'dry' (intrans.)
causative (causal meaning) *kawaka-su* 'dry' (trans.) = 'make dry'

A 'causative' is an overtly marked causal verb. A second strategy is 'anticausative' coding, in which the noncausal verb is derived from the causal base, as in the following example from German:

- (2) *drehen* 'turn' (trans.) > *sich* *drehen* 'turn' (intrans.)
turn REFL turn

In this example, it is the noncausal verb which is overtly coded, in this case by the addition of a reflexive pronoun to the causal verb *drehen*. The German verb *sich drehen* is an 'anticausative' to the basic causal verb *drehen*. In order to avoid the terminological confusion which is sometimes found in the literature, we use the terms 'causative' and 'anticausative' strictly to refer to morphosyntactic strategies, and noncausal/causal to denote semantic relations (see Haspelmath 2016 and Haspelmath et al. 2014).

In this article we are particularly interested in 'labile' coding, where there is no formal difference between the noncausal and causal meanings of a verb,¹ as in the following English example sentences:

- (3) The ice is melting.
The sun is melting the ice.

Labile verbs are extraordinarily frequent in Present-Day English, both numerically and in the semantic types of verbs that allow it (Haspelmath 1993: 102; McMillion 2006). Thus, for instance, some unergatives such as *walk*, *jump* or *march* admit labile coding in English (*Andrew walked the dog*), which is typologically exceptional (Haspelmath 2016: 52). In this, it differs from other Germanic languages, such as German (see Haspelmath 1993: 102–103). The differences seem to date back to the earliest attested stages of the languages in question. Several historical-comparative studies conclude that Old English favours labile coding to

¹ 'Labile' is the most common term for this phenomenon in typological studies. Dixon (2000: 30) uses the term 'ambitransitive'. He distinguishes between agentive ambitransitives (verbs in which, when used intransitively, the subject equals the transitive subject) and patientive ambitransitives, where the only argument of the intransitive use has semantic properties of objects. Perlmutter (1978) refers to the former as unergative verbs and to the latter as unaccusative verbs.

a higher degree than other Germanic and even West-Germanic languages such as Old High German (Hermodsson 1952; Ottósson 2013; García García 2020).

The common ancestor of both German and English, the Germanic proto-language, by contrast, had widespread causative marking (Plank and Lahiri 2015: 47). As the first of the following examples illustrates, not only intransitive, but even some transitive verbs (ingestives)² admitted causative marking in Germanic, which is typologically less common:

- (4) **drankija* ‘cause to drink’ (OE *drencan*) < **drinka-* ‘drink’ (OE *drincan*)
 **sankija-* ‘cause to sink’ (OE *sencan*) < **senca-* ‘sink’ (OE *sincan*)

Nearly sixty of these causative oppositions are attested in Old English (Bammesberger 1965; García García 2020), although many of them are not intact any more. In particular, some of them are affected by loss of valency specification when one or both of the members of the causative pair become labile, i.e. can alternate between intransitive (noncausal) and transitive (causal) frames without formal change. This is the case with OE *myltan* ‘melt’, for instance:

- (5) Germ. **melta-* ‘melt’ (intrans.)
 Germ. **maltija-* ‘melt’ (sth., trans.) > OE *myltan* ‘melt’ (sth., trans.) and ‘melt’ (intrans.)

Germanic distinguishes morphologically between the intransitive-noncausal (**melta-*) and transitive-causal (**maltija-*) usages of *melt*, whereas in Old English *myltan* can be used with both argument frames. For labile verbs such as *myltan*, the formal distinction between different valency frames does not hold any more. Labilization is thus a process of morphological syncretism by which two different categories, namely the intransitive-noncausal and the transitive-causal valency frames, cease to be distinguished formally. The eventual loss of the causative formation is connected to the rise of labilization in English, as the former gives way to the latter as the main valency coding strategy in this language (see van Gelderen 2011; García García 2020).

As the test group for this paper on labilization in Old English, we have chosen labile verbs stemming from Germanic causative pairs like those in (4) above. This ensures that the verbs were coded as either noncausal or causal in Germanic, that is, were initially non-labile and became so after the common Germanic period, during the transition to the Old English period or within this period itself. According to García García (2020), there are 13 of these labile verb pairs that derive from causative oppositions in Old English, some of which are the forerunners of Present-

² The term ‘ingestive’ refers to verbs of intake, both physical and mental, such as *drink*, *eat*, *learn* or *remember*.

Day English labile verbs such as *melt* or *burn*. They all have intransitive bases and most of them fall semantically within the scope of what are sometimes called ‘inchoative/causative’ pairs, especially in older literature (Haspelmath 1993; Levin 1993). This means basically that they denote changes of state or changes of position.³ Following Haspelmath et al. (2014: 590 with n. 4), we prefer to use the terms ‘noncausal/causal’ instead of ‘inchoative/causative’ to describe the semantic relationship between the members of the pairs above, although ‘noncausal’ is less restricted than ‘inchoative’. As stated above, we reserve the term ‘causative’ for specially coded causal verbs.

The main goal of this paper is to study the spread of labilization in the course of the Old English period by identifying chronological and textual variation patterns in the distribution of labile verbs in English texts from the seventh to the eleventh centuries CE. A chronologically increasing pattern would reveal a tendency towards labilization within the Old English period itself, such as has been suggested in studies of a historical-comparative persuasion by drawing evidence from the Germanic family (Hermodsson 1952; van Gelderen 2011; Ottósson 2013; García García 2020). In such case, the effect of French influence on the increase of labile verbs in Middle English highlighted by Ingham (2020) would reinforce an already existing process. A decreasing or even pattern in the chronological distribution of labile verbs would refute the existence of a tendency towards labilization in Old English. The abundance of labile verbs pointed out by the aforementioned comparative studies would have to be explained by processes that had affected the language well before the first written records, and French influence alone might explain the rise of lability in Middle English.⁴

With respect to the second factor, text type, our aim is to detect differences in the spread of labile verbs between verse, prose and gloss (the classification will be justified in Section 2 below). The results in this area have the potential to cast light both on the development of labilization in Old English and on the texts themselves in issues such as date of composition, register or degree of conserva-

3 According to Haspelmath (1993: 90) “[a]n **inchoative/causative verb pair** is defined semantically: it is a pair of verbs which express the same basic situation (generally a change of state, more rarely a going-on) and differ only in that the **causative** verb meaning includes an agent participant who causes the situation, whereas the **inchoative** verb meaning excludes a causing agent and presents the situation as occurring spontaneously”. For Levin (1993: *passim*) the “inchoative/causatives alternation” is one of the types of “causative alternations”, to which other alternations such as the “induced action alternation” (*jump, gallop*) belong. For a detailed description of verb meanings that fall within what he calls the “labile transitivity alternation”, see McMillion (2006: 15–31).

4 Celtic influence on lability in Old English has been rejected by Poppe (2009).

tism. Another question of concern is whether any idiosyncrasies with respect to the items of our data sample can be detected in individual texts.

Finally, with this study on the differences between early and late Old English morphosyntax we hope to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the language of this period, which is often approached as a single uniform entity.⁵ In fact, this is the case with previous studies where Old English labile verbs are touched upon, such as Hermodsson (1952), McMillion (2006), van Gelderen (2011), Ottósson (2013) or García García (2020), which are all based on lexicographical sources. In contrast to these studies, the present one focuses on the diachronic and textual variation within the Old English period and is based on textual sources.

In the following section of our paper (Section 2), we will discuss the corpus design and methodology. In Section 3, we lay out and discuss the data concerning the chronology and text type distribution of labilized verbs. Section 4 presents the final conclusions drawn from the analysis of the data and suggests questions for further research.

2 Corpus and Methodology

As has been pointed out throughout the introductory section, this paper focuses on causative pairs with signs of labilization. The list in García García (2020) served as an initial guide, although this has been revised and corrected when necessary.⁶ Additionally, prefixed formations with *ge-* have been taken into account, since, arguably, this prefix carries little semantic weight and does not seem to be connected with valency changes (see Lindemann 1970; Brinton 1988; Martín Arista 2012; McFadden 2015 for the meanings and functions attributed to *ge-*).⁷ Other prefixes such as *be-*, frequently attached to the verbs under study, on the other hand, were left out of this investigation, since they are responsible for the change in argument frame of the verb: for instance, *bebūgan* ‘surround’, where *be-* introduces a new argument, or *bewindan* ‘wind, encompass, wrap’, where it introduces

⁵ There are of course exceptions, even in works of a general scope, such as for instance Hogg (1992), who consistently differentiates between early and late Old English when dealing with the morphological aspects of the language.

⁶ Part of the corpus used in the present study was compiled for one of the sections of the PhD thesis by Ruiz Narbona (2018).

⁷ We do, however, take into account traditional views such as Streitberg’s (1891), according to which *ge-* has a perfective and hence transitivity effect, and discuss the possibility of such an effect where pertinent (see e.g. Section 3.5 below).

a spatial complement as direct object (see Ruiz Narbona 2018 for more information on the effects of different prefixes on labile morphological causatives). All in all, we have analysed 1,621 tokens belonging to 42 different verbs. They are distributed as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Verbs and number of examples in our corpus

Strong verbs	Number of attestations	Causative verbs	Number of attestations
<i>būgan</i> ‘bow, bend’	118	<i>bīgan</i> ‘bend, submit’	22
<i>gebūgan</i> ‘bow, bend’	63	<i>gebīgan</i> ‘bend, submit’	93
<i>byrnan</i> ‘burn’	73	<i>bærnan</i> ‘burn’	79
<i>gebyrnan</i> ‘burn’	4	<i>gebærnan</i> ‘burn’	25
<i>calan</i> ‘be cold’	6	<i>cēlan</i> ‘cool’	8
		<i>gecēlan</i> ‘cool’	13
<i>deorfan</i> ‘labour; be in danger’	17	<i>dyrfan</i> ‘torment’	8
<i>gedeorfan</i> ‘labour; be in danger’	6		
<i>hweorfan</i> ‘turn’	151	<i>hwyrfan</i> ‘turn’	35
<i>gehweorfan</i> ‘turn’	51	<i>gehwyrfan</i> ‘turn’	81
<i>belīfan</i> ‘be left’	45	<i>læfan</i> ‘leave; be left’	46
<i>meltan</i> ‘melt’	12	<i>myltan</i> ‘melt’	12
<i>gemeltan</i> ‘melt’	13	<i>gemyltan</i> ‘melt’	11
<i>smēocan</i> ‘emit smoke’	20	<i>smīcan</i> ‘smoke’	7
<i>stincan</i> ‘spring; emit a smell’	17	<i>stencan</i> ‘scatter’	4
<i>gestincan</i> ‘smell’	15		
<i>swingan</i> ‘beat; swing’	60	<i>swengan</i> ‘dash’	2
<i>geswingan</i> ‘beat’	6	<i>geswengan</i> ‘beat’	1
<i>wæcnan</i> ‘wake up’	10	<i>weccean</i> ‘wake up’	21
<i>wegan</i> ‘move; weigh’	19	<i>wecgan</i> ‘wag; move’	6
<i>gewegan</i> ‘weigh; move’	22		
<i>windan</i> ‘turn; leap’	22	<i>wendan</i> ‘turn; go’	270
<i>gewindan</i> ‘twist’	8	<i>gewendan</i> ‘turn; go’	119

As far as the compilation of examples is concerned, our main tool was the *Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus* (DOEC henceforth), the largest Old English database to date. The compilation process will be described below. We also made use of the following lexicographical tools for the translation of examples and other purposes which will be made explicit below: the *Dictionary of Old English A–I Online* (DOE) for entries A to I, Bosworth-Toller (1898–1921) and Nerthus (2016).

With respect to the design of our corpus, our main aim was to take into account all major Old English texts and, at the same time, to include as many tokens of the relevant verbs as possible. Balance between different text types and dates of composition was also initially intended, but this proved unfeasible, as will be specified below. In a first stage, we selected all the texts included in the *Helsinki Corpus*. As some of the verbs to be analysed (Table 1) were either underrepresented or not attested at all in the initial corpus, we conducted a second search with the specific aim of compiling examples of rather rare verbs which appear in texts that were not included in our first selection. Notice that, concerning those texts, such as Isidore's *Sententiae* (IsidSent)⁸ or *Monastic Canticles* (MonCa1 and 3), to name some, we have only included examples of these scarcely attested verbs. If even with this provision an item is not well represented in our corpus, which invariably means that there are only a few tokens in the whole Old English corpus, we incorporate all of these tokens into our data sample. We retrieve these examples through searches in the entire *DOEC* and collate and augment them, as the case may be, with the quotations provided in the lexicographical sources mentioned above. The dictionary examples had to be tagged with respect to date and text type, like the rest of the data, and they had to be morphosyntactically analysed, too, according to the parameters relevant for our study. Finally, we must inevitably have failed to spot some examples due to the great number of spelling variations of some of the verbs under study, as explained below. All in all, our corpus contains over 1,500,000 words from 225 different texts, based on the text division made by *DOEC*.⁹

The *Helsinki Corpus* and Fulk and Cain (2003) were our main sources too, as far as the classification of our texts was concerned. We have opted for a twofold classification with regards to date of composition. Thus, we distinguish only between early texts (up to circa 950) and late texts (circa 950–1100). As Fulk and Cain (2003) comment, there is general agreement on this division, although the dating of some texts, especially *Beowulf*, remains controversial. In this regard, we follow them and Neidorf and Pascual (2019), who advocate for an early date of composition.

With regards to text types, we have decided on a threefold division as does Cichosz (2010), although with some differences. We keep the distinction between prose and verse, but discard translation as a separate category due to the difficulties in determining the influence of Latin in these cases. Instead, we incorporate

⁸ Short titles have been taken from *DOEC*.

⁹ Notice, thus, that, for example, the translation of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* consists of seven different texts: BedeHead, Bede 1, 2, 3, 3 (O), 4 and 5.

the label ‘gloss’ as used in *DOEC*.¹⁰ It can be argued that gloss texts could have been included in the category prose, since they are prose texts after all. However, we decided to keep this distinction so that the possible influence of Latin on Old English valency could be assessed. For instance, constructions of the transitive-causal verb *gebigan* ‘bow, bend (sth.); submit (sth.) to; bow (sth.) away from’ with a reflexive pronoun appear only in glossed texts when translating an anticausative construction such as *se inclinans* ‘bending itself’; see example (6) below.

- (6) et iterum se inclinans scribebat in terram
& eftersona hine gibeg awrat on eorðo
‘And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground’

JnGl (Ru) [0344 (8.8)]¹¹

Summarizing, our texts have been divided into early and late with regards to date of composition, and into prose, verse and gloss as far as text type is concerned, giving a total of six different categories. The total number of texts per category is illustrated in Table 2 below. Table 3 gives the total word count and the word count per category. In total, our corpus consists of 1,643,162 words, more than half of the total surviving Old English corpus, comprising 3,033,142 words.

Table 2: Number of texts per category and in total

	Early prose	Early verse	Early gloss	Late prose	Late verse	Late gloss	Total
Number of texts	38	2	2	132	13	38	225

Table 3: Number of words per category and total

	Early prose	Early verse	Early gloss	Late prose	Late verse	Late gloss	Total
Word number	401,463	34,361	63,562	517,673	74,912	551,191	1,643,162

10 Prose, verse and gloss texts are tagged with the letters B, A and C respectively. Categories D and E, glossaries and inscriptions were not included in our study. The former provides no information about valency. The latter provided no results at all.

11 Old English quotations have been taken from *DOEC*. Due to structural differences between the two languages, the position of the Old English interpretamenta does not always fully coincide with that of their Latin models in the following examples.

As can be seen in Table 3 above, it was impossible to design a balanced corpus due to the nature of the surviving Old English texts. Thus, late texts are much more common than their early counterparts and gloss and prose texts far outnumber verse ones.

Focus will be laid now on the compilation process of each of the individual examples constituting our corpus. As mentioned above, the *DOEC* was our major source of examples. However, comprehensive as it is, it presents a relevant shortcoming as far as searches are concerned: it is not lemmatized, and, therefore, different forms of the verbs under study had to be searched for manually one at a time. In order to make sure that we included all or at least as many examples as possible of the verbs in our corpus, we designed open-ended search sequences based on *all* the root variants provided by the *DOE*, which virtually amounts to every attested variant. When a particular verb was not available in the *DOE*, such as *wendan*, we consulted the corresponding completed entry of its prefixed forms such as *āwenden* and *bewendan*, as well as the information in Bosworth-Toller, Campbell (1959), Brunner (1965) and Nerthus (2016). By way of illustration, below are listed the different search sequences of the verb *byrn* that we used:

- (7) *byrn*, *beorn*, *birn*, *biern*, *biorn*, *barn*, *born*, *bearn*, *burn*

This was the first step of the process. Once these examples were compiled, they had to be discriminated, as, of course, forms such as *byrn* and *bearn* above, are not exclusive of the verbal paradigm of *byrn*. When these forms were introduced, the search engine of *DOEC* retrieved attestations of the nouns *byrne* ‘coat of mail’ or *bearn* ‘child’, to name just two examples. More problematic, however, was the fact that some specific forms are shared by both the strong verb and its causative counterpart. *byg* and *bieg* in the case of *būgan* and *bīgan* or *hwyrf*, *hweorf*, *hwierf*, *hwærf*, *hwearf*, *huerf* in the pair *hweorfan/hwyrfan*. Due to this homonymy, it was impossible to determine whether some attestations belonged to the strong verb or its causative counterpart without falling into a circular argument involving valency. Therefore, these morphologically ambiguous examples were discarded. So, too, were examples that provided no information regarding the valency of the verb under study. Such is the case of attestations in the form of present and past participles (in passive constructions, for instance). An example such as *byrnendum* in (8) is not indicative of the valency of the verb *byrn*.

- (8) *Ac he ascoc hi into byrnendum fyre*
 But he shook off her [a snake, OE *næddre* f.] into burning fire
 ‘But he shook it off into the burning fire’

ÆCHom I, 37 [0090 (505.251)]

Once the data were filtered and we were left with examples that represented the verbs analysed in this study, the relevant text fragments were translated and parsed. Tokens were tagged for valency (besides date and text type) as either intransitive-noncausal (9a) or transitive-causal (9b):

- (9) a. & *her on ðison geare barn Cristes cyrce*
 & *here in this year burnt Christ's church*
 'And this year the church of Christ burnt'
 Chron A [0627 (1066.3)]

- b. *and swa færingga fyr wudu byrneð, [...]*
 and as suddenly fire wood burns, [...]
 'And as suddenly fire burns wood'
 PPs [0520 (82.10)]

For the purposes of the present article the following two features of noncausal/causal oppositions of the type we are dealing with here have to be borne in mind: firstly, they express the same basic situation, without or with an agent respectively, and they differ in their argument frame or valency, that is, they ultimately constitute intransitive and transitive variants of the same verbal meaning; secondly, the subject of the intransitive-noncausal verb corresponds to the object of the transitive-causal verb.

The above conditions mean that so-called 'intransitive' uses due to object deletion are tagged differently from intransitive-noncausal uses, as the following example illustrates:

- (10) & *a bærndon swa hi geferdon*
 and ever burnt as they went
 'And they kept on burning as they went'
 Chron C [0615 (1010.8)]

This example is tagged as transitive-causal in our database, since the verb *bærndon* is causal and the subject is an agent.¹² In contrast, in (9a) above, which we tag as intransitive-noncausal, the subject of *byrnan* (*Cristes cyrce*) is a patient and corresponds, in terms of thematic role, to the object of the transitive-causal use as exemplified in (9b).

The tagging of examples with a reflexive pronoun needs commenting on, too. Consider the following fragment:

¹² Cases of object deletion are often classified as intransitive in dictionaries. This is one of the reasons why we had to submit even dictionary quotations to our own analysis before including them in the database. See as illustration a decisive case in Section 3.1 below, OE *bigan*.

- (11) *Se cwytra þa [...] gehwyrfde hine sylfne and cwæþ: [...]*
 The killer then [...] turned him self and said: [...]
 ‘The killer then turned around and said:’

LS 16 (MargaretCot.Tib.A.iii) [0151 (22.6)]

Here, even though the clause is semantically intransitive-noncausal, *gehwyrfan* has been tagged as transitive-causal, with the reflexive pronoun acting as detransitiviser, or more properly ‘decausativizer’, as in the anticausative construction *sich drehen* in (2) above. There are other intransitive clauses with *hwyrfan* without a reflexive pronoun, such as the following:

- (12) *Þu bist hal gyf þu to gode gehwyrfst*
 You are sound if you to God turn
 ‘You will be sound if you turn to God’

Prog 4 [0018 (18)]

Only examples such as (12) are tagged as intransitive-noncausal in our sample. The use and omission of the reflexive pronoun are connected to the rise of lability, as the intransitive-noncausal use of a transitive-causal verb seems to be often preceded by a reflexive construction of the type illustrated in (11) above. Eventually, the reflexive pronoun might be omitted, as in (12). The process, however, cannot be discussed in any length here.

Each verb token was then tagged once more according to whether its valency (intransitive-noncausal or transitive-causal) corresponds to the historically expected valency for that verbal form in particular or not. Thus, the historically expected valency (HEV) of the strong verb *byrnan* is intransitive, as it is the intransitive-noncausal member of the causative pair *byrnan/bærnan*. The HEV of *bærnan* is transitive. Transitive uses of noncausal verbs such as *byrnan* represent an innovation and are tagged as NHEV (not historically expected valency). The same applies to intransitive uses of causatives, such as *bærnan*. For the purposes of this investigation, the instances of NHEV are crucial. Once a verbal form adds a new valency frame (NHEV) to its original one (HEV), it has become labile. When and in which texts this occurs is precisely what we aim to explore in this paper. Note that a single NHEV example suffices to demonstrate the lability of a given verb.

A necessary observation has to be made with regards to semantic changes that may obscure prior labile use. From a synchronic point of view, a verb is labile only if there is no semantic change between the intransitive-noncausal and transitive-causal uses, as in e.g. PDE ‘to turn’. However, from a diachronic point of view, sometimes labile-like valency alternations with disparate meanings can be linked to previous genuine labile uses affected by subsequent semantic change. One such example is provided by the causative OE *wendan*, originally causal ‘to turn something’. The verb frequently shows the meanings ‘to go’, ‘to return’.

These do not reflect a genuine labile use of *wendan* ‘to turn sth.’, as they involve not only changes in the argument frame but also a semantic departure from transitive-causal ‘to turn’. However, they can be traced back to the intransitive-non-causal use of ‘to turn’ with an adverbial of direction. In fact, in some ‘bridging’ contexts¹³ both meanings are possible, as in the following example, where *wendan* can be translated as both ‘turned’ and ‘went’:

- (13) *Þa hi ða hamweard wendon mid þære <herehybe>*
 Then they then homewards turned/went with the war-booty
 ‘Then they went/turned home with the war-booty’

Chron D [0316 (885.10)]

The next example with reflexive pronoun illustrates an intermediate stage between transitive-causal and plain intransitive-noncausal uses, without reflexive pronoun:

- (14) *þa wende he hine west wið Eaxanceastres mid ealre þære fyrde*
 then turned he himself west against Exeter with all the army
 ‘He then went/turned west to Exeter with his entire army’

Chron D [0362 (894.34)]

We have to assume, then, that in OE *wendan*, and in a few other verbs in our corpus, labilization precedes semantic change. In some cases, the connection between the original and later meanings is clear, as in *wendan*, where both the original meaning and bridging contexts are attested which evince the development from transitive ‘to turn’ into intransitive ‘to go’. In other cases, the connection is less evident because of absence of relevant data. Such a case is *swingan* ‘beat, whip’ (trans.); ‘wing, soar’ (intrans.), for which neither the presumed original meaning (‘to swing’) nor bridging contexts between the different meanings are attested in Old English (see Section 3.10 below for more details).

We will use the term ‘lexicalization’ to refer to the type of semantic change undergone by *wendan* and *swingan* above. Following Evans and Wilkins (2000: 549–550), we define ‘lexicalization’ here as the process by which contextual interpretations (as in (13) above) become coded as distinct meanings, giving rise to polysemy.¹⁴ Other ‘lexicalized’ verbs in our corpus are *hwyrfan* ‘turn’ (trans-caus.

¹³ We take the term from Evans and Wilkins (2000: 550).

¹⁴ Brinton and Traugott (2005: 21) and Hopper and Traugott (2003: 82, 235 note 2 to ch. 4) prefer the term ‘semanticization’ for this process. The former describe lexicalization as the rise of new “formal and semantic properties that are not completely derivable or predictable from the constituents of the construction or the word formation pattern” (Brinton and Traugott 2005: 96). We thank one of our reviewers for pointing this out to us.

and intrans-noncaus.), ‘change’, ‘return’, ‘wander’, and *wegan* ‘move’, ‘carry’, ‘weigh’, as will be expounded in Sections 3.5 and 3.12 respectively. We use the term ‘labile-lexicalized verbs’ to refer to those verbs in which a process of extensive semantic change has taken place after labile use. We have to assume early labilization in all of them in terms of relative chronology: the verbs in question must have been used as labile well before their attestation in the new labile-lexicalized meaning to allow for such extensive semantic change to have taken place.

Finally, since a formation might have been current in spoken Old English but not attested until much later, we have supplemented textual attestation with other criteria in order to avoid circular arguments when establishing the possible date of the labilization of a verb, which is one of the main aims of this paper. We consider lexicalized uses that presuppose the new valency use as indicators of early labilization, besides early attestation in Old English.

3 Data Analysis

In this section we lay out the data concerning the distribution of the different valency uses of each verb. The section is divided into 13 entries. In each entry we have grouped together all four verbal items belonging to the same root, namely the unprefixed strong verb (e.g. *byrnan*), the unprefixed causative (*bǣrnan*) and their corresponding *ge-* formations (*gebyrnan*, *gebǣrnan*), in case they are attested. In each entry we will discuss the different meanings of each verb in our corpus, as well as the valency, HEV or NHEV, of every single attestation. Special attention will be paid to cases of NHEV, as they involve labilization. They will be presented in different tables where they will be classified into the textual and chronological categories discussed above, namely early prose, early verse, etc. This will be followed by a discussion of the data. Emphasis will be laid on whether early labilization can be detected or not and, in the first case, whether there is a significant increase of lability in later texts. The possible influence of text type on labilization will also be addressed. As has just been explained above, besides presence in early Old English texts, lexicalized uses that presuppose a new valency use (NHEV) are considered indicators of early labilization.

3.1 *Būgan, gebūgan, bīgan, gebīgan*

- *Būgan* ‘bow, bend; bow to, submit to; bow away from’¹⁵ (118x in our corpus; ca. 275x *DOE*) and *gebūgan* (63x; ca. 175 *DOE*) (same meanings as *būgan*) are always intransitive-noncausal, i.e. no signs of lability are found.
- The causative *bīgan* ‘bend (sth.); submit (sth.) to; bow (sth.) away from’ (trans-caus.); ‘bend, bow’ (intrans-noncaus.) (22x; ca. 65x *DOE*) does show valency changes that amount to lability at least from late Old English; see (15).
- *Gebīgan* (same meanings as *bīgan*) (93x in our corpus; ca. 300x *DOE*) shows labilization since the early Old English period, i.e. CP [1493 (42.306.2)] and PPs (Prose) [0553 (37.6)].
- Most examples of intransitive-noncausal *gebīgan* are late, especially in *Ælfric*. There are also examples in the *Lindisfarne* and *Rushworth Gospels*.

The only intransitive-noncausal instance of *bīgan* in our corpus follows (*DOE* does not list any other intransitive-noncausal examples either):

(15) *Se ord bigde upp to þam hiltum*
 The point bent up to the hilt
 ‘The point (of the sword) bent up to the hilt’

ÆLS (Ash Wed) [0076 (225)]

This example is labelled as “without expressed object” in *DOE*. This would imply an agentive subject (*se ord* ‘the point’), a transitive-causal verb (*bigde upp* ‘bent (sth.) up’) and a covert object (‘something’). Instead, we suggest that (15) is an intransitive-noncausal clause where the subject is non-agentive and corresponds to the object of the causal counterpart of *bīgan* ‘bend (sth.)’ (‘someone bent *the point [of the sword]*’, ‘*the point [of the sword]* was bent’). This example in *Ælfric* gives evidence of labile use of *bīgan* at least since late Old English.

The number and distribution of NHEV examples are listed in Tables 4a and 4b below.

15 Notice that the meanings we give for the verbs do not always coincide one to one with the meanings in the reference tools. This is intentional and has to do with the fact that, due to the nature of our study, we can only work with the meanings and syntactic environments actually attested in our data sample. Therefore, we list only these. In the case of *būgan* and *gebūgan*, for instance, they can also mean ‘to turn’ (see *DOE* s.vv. *būgan* 2, *gebūgan*), but they are not used with that meaning in any of the clauses in our corpus.

Table 4a: Number of HEV and NHEV instances of *bīgan* and *gebīgan*

Verb	Intrans-noncaus. (NHEV)	Trans-caus. (HEV)	Total
<i>bīgan</i>	1	21	22
<i>gebīgan</i>	13	80	93

Table 4b: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *bīgan* and *gebīgan* by text type and date of composition

Verb	Early prose	Late prose	Late gloss	Total
<i>bīgan</i>	0	1	0	1
<i>gebīgan</i>	2	8	3	13

In conclusion, the two causative verbs of this group, *bīgan* and *gebīgan*, show labilization. They are attested not only as transitive-causal, but also as intransitive-noncausal verbs – *bīgan* once in a late text, and *gebīgan* occasionally in early Old English and more frequently in late Old English texts of different diatopic variants. This suggests a remarkable increase in labilization throughout the Old English period regardless of dialectal constraints.

3.2 *Byrnan, gebyrnan, bǣrnan, gebǣrnan*

- *Byrnan* ‘burn, be on fire’ (intrans-noncaus.); ‘burn (sth.)’ (trans-caus.) (79x in our corpus; ca. 450x¹⁶ DOE) is mostly used in its inherited intransitive-noncausal sense, although there are three transitive-causal examples in our corpus (four in DOE), in Jn (WSCp) [0203 (5.35)], PPs (Krapp) [0520 (82.10)] and MtGl (Ru) [0418 (13.30)].
- The date and scarcity of transitive occurrences suggest that this is a late innovation for *byrnan*.
- *Gebyrnan* ‘burn, be on fire’ (intrans-noncaus.); ‘burn, destroy by fire’ (trans-caus.) (4x in the entire Old English corpus). It is intransitive-noncausal in Beo [0740 (2697)] and HyGl 1 [0009 (8.2)], and transitive-causal in DurRitGl 1 [0781 (107.15)] and MtGl (Li) [0736 (22.7)]. The last reference follows:

¹⁶ Around 225 of these attestations are present participles which have been excluded from our data sample (*the burning flame* is not necessarily indicative of the valency of *burn*).

(16)	rex	[...]	iratus	est	[...]	et	ciuitatem	illorum	succendit
	<i>ðe cynig</i>	[...]	<i>wurað</i>	<i>wæs</i>	[...]	&	<i>burug</i>	<i>hiora</i>	<i>gebarn</i>
	the king	[...]	angry	was	[...]	&	town	their	burnt
	‘The king was angry and burnt down their town’								

MtGl (Li) [0736 (22.7)]

It is noteworthy that the Mercian gloss to the *Rushworth Gospels* (MtGl (Ru) [0726 (22.7)]) and the *West Saxon Gospels* (Mt (WSCp) [0747 (22.7)]) have *forbernde* and *forbærnde* respectively in this same passage. These are the prefixed forms of the causative *bærmnan*, which is the historically “adequate” verb in this context, in contrast to *gebarn* in (16) above.¹⁷ This could point either to a dialectal (northern) or idiolectal (Aldred’s) constraint on the spread of labile *gebyrman*. The valency data of *byrnan* and *gebyrman* are listed in Table 5a below.

Table 5a: Number of HEV and NHEV instances of *byrnan* and *gebyrnan*

Verb	Intrans-noncaus. (HEV)	Trans-caus. (NHEV)	Total
<i>byrnan</i>	70	3	73
<i>gebyrnan</i>	2	2	4

Table 5b shows the distribution of NHEV examples of *byrnan* and *gebyrman* by date and text type.

Table 5b: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *byrnan* and *gebyrnan* by text type and date of composition

Verb	Late prose	Late verse	Late gloss	Total
<i>byrnan</i>	1	1	1	3
<i>gebyrnan</i>	0	0	2	2

- The causative *bærmnan* ‘burn, cause to burn, destroy/kill by fire’ (trans-caus.); ‘burn, be kindled, be inflamed, give light’ (intrans-noncaus.) (79x; DOE 200x) is mostly (75x) used in its transitive-causal sense (HEV). There are four intransitive-noncausal (NHEV) instances in our data, one early and the other three late; see Table 5c.

¹⁷ The presence of the prefix makes even more significant the use of the historically expected verbal root, the causative, since the prefixed non-causative *forbyrman* could arguably have been used to express the transitive-causal meaning ‘burn (sth.)’ due to the possible transitivising effect of *for-* suggested by Bosworth-Toller s.v. *for* and Quirk and Wrenn (1957: 110), among others.

- *Gebæрман* ‘burn (trans-caus.); inflame’ (25x; *DOE* 29x), found mostly in medical recipes, is always transitive-causal in our corpus.

The following is an example of *bæрман* with NHEV, intransitive-noncausal:

- (17) Et dixerunt ad inuicem nonne cor nostrum ardens erat in nobis
 & *cuoedon bituih him ahne heorta usra bermende wæs in usic*
 and said between them not our heart burning was in us
 ‘And they said to each other: were not our hearts burning inside us?’

LkG1 (Li) [1131 (24.32)]

Table 5c: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *bæрман* by text type and date of composition

Verb	Early prose	Late prose	Late gloss	Total
<i>bæрман</i>	1	2	1	4

- To conclude, there is early evidence of lability in *bæрман*, whereas *byрман*, *gebyрман* are not attested in their NHEV until late Old English.
- NHEV use of *gebyрман* might be dialectally or idiolectally conditioned.
- Labile use may well have been fostered by the high degree of variation and homonymy in the paradigms of *byрман* and *bæрман* (see Stanley 1952–1953), which must have led to confusion.

3.3 *Calan, cēlan, gecēlan*¹⁸

- *Calan* ‘be or become cold’ is attested 11 times in the entire Old English corpus, five of them in Latin glossaries without context. In the other six attestations, it is an intransitive-noncausal verb.
- Its causative pendant *cēlan* ‘cool (sth.); quench (thirst)’ is also attested 11 times in Old English. We have only included eight examples in our database because three of them appear as past participles in passive clauses and have, therefore, been discarded, as pointed out in Section 2. It is always a transitive-causal verb (HEV).
- *Gecēlan* ‘cool (sth.), to quench (thirst)’ (trans-caus.); ‘become cool’ (intrans-noncaus.) (13x in our corpus, 14x *DOE*)¹⁹ is used as intransitive-noncausal

¹⁸ Given the paucity of attestations, we have analysed and included in our database all the instances of the verbs in this and the following group (3.4), *deorfan*, *gedeorfan* and *dyrfan*.

¹⁹ The *DOE* lists eight of the alleged 14 attestations of *gecēlan*. We have only been able to retrieve 13 examples with our searches in the *DOEC*.

(NHEV) on four occasions, all of them versions of the same text, PsGI (38.14).²⁰ This relativizes the significance of this innovation.

The example below illustrates the use of *gecēlan* as an intransitive-noncausal verb.

(18) *Forlæt me þæt ic gecele ærþamðe ic gange*
 Abandon me that I become cool before I go
 ‘Abandon me so that I become cool before I go’

PsGID [0587 (38.14)]

Table 6a: Number of HEV and NHEV instances of *cēlan* and *gecēlan*

Verb	Intrans-noncaus. (NHEV)	Trans-caus. (HEV)	Total
<i>cēlan</i>	0	8	8
<i>gecēlan</i>	4	9	13

Table 6b: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *gecēlan* by text type and date of composition

Verb	Late gloss	Total
<i>gecēlan</i>	4	4

Summarizing, there is late evidence of labile use in OE *gecēlan*, both transitive-causal ‘cool (sth.)’ and intransitive-noncausal ‘become cool’.

3.4 *Deorfan, gedeorfan, dyrfan*

- *Deorfan* ‘labour; be in danger’ (17x) and *gedeorfan* ‘labour; perish at sea’ (6x) are always intransitive-noncausal.
- *Dyrfan* ‘torment; bring into danger’ (8x) is transitive-causal in all its attestations,²¹ except allegedly for (19) below which according to the *DOE* is intransitive ‘keep busy, engage in, be diligent about’:

²⁰ PsGIF [0579 (38.14)], PsGIH [0582 (38.14)] and PsGIK [0588 (38.14)].

²¹ The *DOE* distinguishes a “transitive” and a “causative” use of *dyrfan*, based seemingly on the semantic difference between the meanings around ‘to torment’ and ‘to bring into danger’. According to our parameters and terminology, both uses are ‘transitive-causal’ with respect to the intransitive-noncausal meanings of *deorfan*, and *dyrfan* is a ‘causative’ verb because of its word-formation pattern.

(19) ego autem	exercebor	in	mandatis	tuis
<i>ic beo soðlice</i>	<i>gedyrfe</i>	<i>on</i>	<i>bebodum</i>	<i>þinum</i>
I am truly	exercised	in	commands	your
'I will truly exercise myself in your commands'				

PsGII [2023 (118.78)]

In spite of *DOE*'s classification, this example does not attest the intransitive usage of *dyrfan*: *gedyrfe* is most probably an error for the past participle *gedyrfede*, as pointed out in *DOE* s.v. *dyrfan*. The participle is part of a passive construction *beo [...] gedyrfe* 'I am [...] exercised', which glosses the passive lat. verb *exercebor*. It supplies therefore no evidence for the intransitive-noncausal use of *dyrfan*.

In conclusion, none of the verbs in this group is labile, *pace* García García (2020: 177).

3.5 *Hweorfan, gehweorfan, hwyrfan, gehwyrfan*

- *Hweorfan* 'turn to/from, turn around, return, go, wander' (intrans-noncaus.); 'change (sth.), turn (sth.)' (trans-caus.) (151x in our corpus; ca. 225x *DOE*) is almost exclusively intransitive-noncausal (HEV). There are three transitive-causal instances both in our corpus and in *DOE*; (20) below is one of them, extracted from the *Vercelli Homilies*.
- Given the rarity of transitive-causal usages of this extremely frequent verb and the fact that they always occur in late texts, the innovation can be reliably dated in late Old English.
- *Gehweorfan* 'turn (back, away, towards), return; change (intrans-noncaus.)' and 'turn; change (sth.) (trans-caus.)' (51x in our corpus; ca. 90x *DOE*) is intransitive-noncausal 28 times and transitive-causal 23 times.
- The transitive-causal use of this verb starts in early Old English (*Cura Pastoralis*) and increases in the late period, especially in verse (*Andreas* and the *Paris Psalter*) and the *Psalter Gloss* mostly.

The following quotation illustrates transitive-causal use (NHEV) of *hweorfan*:

(20) we	ne	sculon	ure	heortan	eft	to	him	<i>hweorfan</i>
we	not	must	our	hearts	again	to	him	turn
'We must not turn our hearts to him again'								

HomU7 (ScraggVerc 22) [0104 (176)]

Table 7a: Number of instances of HEV and NHEV of *hweorfan* and *gehweorfan*

Verb	Intrans-noncaus. (HEV)	Trans-caus. (NHEV)	Total
<i>hweorfan</i>	148	3	151
<i>gehweorfan</i>	28	23	51

Table 7b: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *hweorfan* and *gehweorfan* by text type and date of composition

Verb	Early prose	Late prose	Late verse	Late gloss	Total
<i>hweorfan</i>	0	2	0	1	3
<i>gehweorfan</i>	1	1	8	13	23

- The causative *hwyrfan* (35x in our corpus; ca. 100x *DOE*) ‘turn (sth.); turn (sth.) to/from/back; return (sth.); change (sth.)’ (trans-caus.); ‘turn; turn to; return; change; convert; wander; make an exchange’ (intrans-noncaus.) has clearly undergone labilization, with instances of intransitive-noncausal use (NHEV) outnumbering transitive-causal ones. One of the former follows:

(21) *forðon æfter feower gearum ic eft hwyrfe & þe neosige*
 therefore after four years I again return & you search
 ‘Therefore, in four years’ time, I will return and I will search for you’
 Bede 5 [0484 (17.462.29)]

- *Gehwyrfan* ‘turn (sth.); turn (sth.) to/from; convert (sb.); change (sth.); translate (sth.)’ (trans-caus.); ‘turn to/from; convert; return; change’ (intrans-noncaus.) (81x in our corpus; ca. 150x *DOE*) is frequently used in intransitive-noncausal clauses, like its unprefixed counterpart (see Tables 7c and 7d).

Table 7c: Number of HEV and NHEV instances of *hwyrfan* and *gehwyrfan*

Verb	Intrans-noncaus. (NHEV)	Trans-caus. (HEV)	Total
<i>hwyrfan</i>	22	13	35
<i>gehwyrfan</i>	30	51	81

Table 7d: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *hwyrfan* and *gehwyrfan* by text type and date of composition

Verb	Early prose	Early verse	Late prose	Late verse	Late gloss	Total
<i>hwyrfan</i>	9	1	2	3	7	22
<i>gehwyrfan</i>	7	0	8	1	14	30

Notice that early labilization of *gehweorfan*, *hwyrfan* and *gehwyrfan* is both directly demonstrated by textual evidence and indirectly suggested, too, by the fact that some of their more specific, already lexicalized meanings presuppose innovative valency (NHEV) uses. Thus, for instance, the meanings ‘to return’ and ‘to wander’ in the transitive-causal *hwyrfan* go back to intransitive-noncausal ‘to turn (oneself)’, with subsequent semantic change. The same syntactic and semantic change takes place in OE *wendan* and was explained above, in Section 2.

- In conclusion, labile use of *gehweorfan*, *hwyrfan* and *gehwyrfan* set in early and remained steady during the Old English period.
- The frequent verb *hweorfan* is attested with NHEV only three times in late texts, which strongly suggests late labilization.
- The different behaviour of *hweorfan*, almost always intransitive-noncausal, and *gehweorfan*, with an almost equal amount of intransitive-noncausal (HEV) and transitive-causal (NHEV) instances, may have been influenced by the prefix *ge-*, to which a transitivising effect has traditionally been attributed (Streitberg 1891; Brinton 1988).
- As with *byrnan* and *bærnian* above and *meltan* and *myltan* below, frequent homonymy of *hweorfan* and *hwyrfan* (e.g. third person sg. present *hwyrffþ*) may have contributed to the early and extensive labilization of most members of this group of verbs.

3.6 *Belīfan*, *læfan*

- *Belīfan*²² (45x in our corpus; ca. 120x *DOE*) is mostly intransitive-noncausal ‘be left over, remain’ (43x). There are two transitive-causal (NHEV) examples in our corpus, with the meaning ‘leave (sth.)’. Both are attested in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* MS C, late Old English prose.²³

²² The unprefixed form *līfan* is not attested in Old English. The meaning and participant frame of *belīfan* is the exact mirror image of that of its unprefixed causative counterpart, *læfan*, which suggests that the prefix *be-* has not changed the basic semantics of the verb.

²³ Incidentally, the *DOE* does not register these or any other transitive instances of *belīfan*.

The following is one of the instances of transitive-causal *belifan*:

- (22) & *se* *here* *ða* *ferde* *sum* *to* *Denemearce*
 and the army then travelled part to Denmark
 & *XL* *scypa* *belaf* *mid* *þam* *cynige* *Cnute*
 and XL ships left with the king Cnute
 ‘And then a part of the army travelled to Denmark, and left 40 ships with King Cnut’
 Chron C [0715 (1018.1)]

- OE *læfan* (46x) is mostly transitive-causal ‘leave (sth., sb.) (behind)’ (44x); there are two intransitive-noncausal examples in our corpus, with the meaning ‘to remain’, attested in late Old English. One of them follows:

- (23) *gif* *ðær* *hwæt* *læfde* *forbærnan*
 if there anything remained burn
 ‘If anything remained burning there’
 ÆCHom II, 3 [047 (21.79)]

Table 8: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *læfan*

Verb	Late prose	Late gloss	Total
<i>læfan</i>	1	1	2

- The textual evidence suggests late labilization for both Old English *belifan* and *læfan*.
- Whereas all the other verb meanings in this paper show lability in Present-Day English (cp. e.g. ‘to turn’ or ‘to burn’, both causal and noncausal), ‘to leave’/‘to remain’ do not. This points to asymmetries in the semantic classes that can be labilized in both language stages, which might be worth further research.

3.7 *Meltan*, *gemeltan*, *myltan*, *gemyltan*

- *Meltan* (12x) ‘melt’ (intrans-noncaus.) (4x); ‘digest’ (intrans-noncaus. 6x and trans-caus. 2x) in Bald’s *Leechbook*.
- *Gemeltan* (13x) ‘melt’ is intransitive-noncausal (HEV), except in Bald’s *Leechbook*, where it is labile.

- (24) [...] *gemelte* *eald* *spic* [...]
 [...] melt [imperative] old bacon [...]
 ‘Melt aged bacon [an instruction]’

Lch II (1) [0218 (8.2.2)]

Table 9a: Number of instances of HEV and NHEV of *meltan* and *gemeltan*

Verb	Intrans-noncaus. (HEV)	Trans-caus. (NHEV)	Total
<i>meltan</i>	10	2	12
<i>gemeltan</i>	10	3	13

Table 9b: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *meltan* and *gemeltan*

Verb	Early prose	Total
<i>meltan</i>	2	2
<i>gemeltan</i>	3	3

- *Myltan* (12x) ‘melt; digest’ is also labile. It is attested as an intransitive-non-causal (NHEV) in Bald’s *Leechbook*, and in the *Paris Psalter*.
- *Gemyltan* (11x) ‘melt; digest’ is attested as intransitive-noncausal only once in late Old English prose, also in a medical treatise, as shown in (25):²⁴

(25) *Gyf hwylcum men ædran aheardode syn oppe his mete gemyltan nylle [...]*
 If some man veins hardened are or his food digest would-not [...]
 ‘If the veins of some man grow hard or [if] he cannot digest his food [...]’
 LchI (HerbHead) [0387 (90.9)]

Table 9c: Number of instances of HEV and NHEV of *myltan* and *gemyltan*

Verb	Intrans-noncaus. (NHEV)	Trans-caus. (HEV)	Total
<i>myltan</i>	6	6	12
<i>gemyltan</i>	1	10	11

Table 9d: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *myltan* and *gemyltan*

Verb	Early prose	Late prose	Late verse	Total
<i>myltan</i>	4	0	2	6
<i>gemyltan</i>	0	1	0	1

- To conclude, labilization of *meltan*, *gemeltan* and *myltan* is an early innovation that may have been restricted to Bald’s *Leechbook* in early Old English,

²⁴ Note that we ascribe this quotation to *gemyltan*, and not to *gemeltan*, as Bosworth-Toller s.v. do.

given that the text is a practical medical treatise written in a straightforward style, and hence probably closer to oral language,²⁵ where systemic innovations are first reflected. Another reason for the above assumption is that the specialized meaning ‘to digest’ is confined to this text.

- The spread of labile use of this verb group in the course of the Old English period is confirmed by attestation of NHEV in two texts, the *Paris Psalter* and *The Old English Herbarium*, besides Bald’s *Leechbook* (in late Old English).
- The homonymy of forms in *meltan* and *myltan* is considerable and may have contributed to the spread of lability in this group. As stated in Section 2, ambiguous forms have been removed from the data sample.

3.8 *Smēocan, smīcan*

OE *smēocan* (20x) ‘emit smoke’ (intrans-noncaus., 17x); ‘smoke, fumigate (sth.)’ (trans-caus., 3x) is labile in Old English; (26) below illustrates one of its transitive-causal, NHEV, uses.

(26)	<i>Smeoc</i>	<i>þone</i>	<i>man</i>	<i>mid</i>	<i>gate</i>	<i>hærum</i>
	Smoke	the	man	with	goat’s	hair
	‘Smoke the man with the hairs of a goat’					

Med 1.1 [0156 (7.3)]

OE *smīcan* (7x) ‘smoke (sth.)’ (trans-caus., 4x); ‘emit smoke’ (intrans-noncaus., 3x) is labile in Old English too. Its intransitive-noncausal use (NHEV) is exemplified in (27).

(27)	<i>Domine</i>	<i>inclina</i>	<i>cælos tuos</i>	<i>et</i>	<i>descende</i>	<i>tange</i>	<i>montes</i>	<i>et</i>
	<i>Dryhten</i>	<i>onheld</i>	<i>ðine heofonas</i>	<i>&</i>	<i>ofdune astig</i>	<i>gehrin</i>	<i>muntas</i>	<i>&</i>
	Lord	bend down	your heavens	and	down go	touch	mountains	and
	fumigabunt							
	<i>hie smicað</i>							
	they smoke							
	‘Lord, bend down your heavens and descend [and] touch the mountains and they will smoke’							

PsGl B [2341 (143.5)]

As shown in the tables below (10a and 10b), whereas *smēocan* is only attested in a late text, *Medicina de Quadrupedibus*, the NHEV use of *smīcan* is already detected in early Old English, in two versions of the *Psalter Gloss* (PsGl A and B).

²⁵ See Fulk and Cain (2003: 229).

Table 10a: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *smēocan*

Verb	Late prose	Total
<i>smēocan</i>	3	3

Table 10b: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *smīcan*

Verb	Early gloss	Total
<i>smīcan</i>	3	3

To conclude, OE *smēocan* and *smīcan* have become labile, perhaps at different stages, according to the distribution of their NHEV occurrences. It is noteworthy that the NHEV examples of both verbs appear in one text only in each case, namely *Medicina de Quadrupedibus* and the *Psalter Gloss* respectively.

3.9 *Stincan, gestincan, stencan*

The strong verb OE *stincan* (17x) is always intransitive-noncausal (HEV) in our corpus. It means ‘spring, leap’ in Beo [0631 (2287)] and Rid [0003 (12)], and also ‘emit a smell’ (e.g. Mart 5 [1248 (Oc31, A.15)]). Comparison with other Germanic languages suggests that the former is the verb’s original meaning – see in particular Old Norse *stókkva* ‘to spring’ and Gothic *stiggan* ‘to crash, bump into’ (‘zusammenstoßen’; Seebold 1970: 471–472). Incidentally, this lexical archaism provides additional evidence for an early dating of *Beowulf*, beyond the one recently put forth by Neidorf and Pascual (2019).

OE *gestincan* (15x) ‘perceive by the sense of smelling’ is always attested as transitive, but not causal, as in the following example:

- (28) *beh þe he ne cuðe þa word gestican & ongytan*
 though he not could the words smell and understand
 ‘Although he was not able to smell and understand the words’

GDPref and 3 (C) [0858 (37.256.16)]

The prefixed verb *gestincan* ‘perceive by the sense of smelling’ is transitive with respect to *stincan* ‘emit a smell’. The prefix *ge-* seems to have a transitivising role here. Nevertheless, the alternation ‘to emit a smell’/‘to perceive by the sense of smelling’ is not causal and hence does not involve lability in the sense intended in this paper. For a detailed explanation of this type of non-labile transitive alternation, see McMillion (2006: 24).

OE *stencan* (4x) appears four times in our corpus as ‘scatter, stink, pant’, always intransitive (NHEV), see example (29) below.²⁶ Intransitive ‘to scatter’ stands in a causal alternation with ‘to scatter (sth.)’, which can be easily linked to the presumed original meaning of *stencan* ‘make (sth.) spring’, the morphological causative to *stincan* ‘spring’. We assume then that labilization has taken place, and that the original causal meaning of the causative verb *stencan* is not attested in our corpus.

- (29) *Et qui non congregat mecum spargit*
 & *seþe ne somnaþ mec he stenceþ*
 and the-who not gathers with me he scatters
 ‘The one that does not gather with me, he scatters’

MtGl (Ru) [0368 (12.30)]

Table 11a: Number of HEV and NHEV instances of *stencan*

Verb	Intrans-noncaus. (NHEV)	Trans-caus. (HEV)	Total
<i>stencan</i>	4	0	4

As for their textual distribution, the NHEV examples of *stencan* have been retrieved from the *Lindisfarne* and *Rushworth Gospels* (JnGl (Li) and MtGl (Ru)).

Table 11b: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *stencan* by text type and date of composition

Verb	Late gloss	Total
<i>stencan</i>	4	4

Summarizing, labilization has been assumed for *stencan* ‘scatter’, intransitive, as it involves intransitivization of the original causal meaning ‘to make (sth.) scatter’ (< to make (sth.) spring).

3.10 *Swingan, geswingan, swengan, geswengan*

- OE *swingan* and *swengan* are reflexes of the Germanic causative opposition **swengwa-* ‘swing’/**swangw-ija-* ‘cause to swing, swing (sth.)’.
- OE *swingan* (59x), mostly ‘beat, whip, chastise (sb.)’ (trans-caus.) (58x); it is attested once as intransitive-noncausal (HEV) ‘swing, wing’ in *Beowulf* (see

²⁶ Bosworth-Toller have two separate entries for *stencan*: ‘to scatter’ and ‘to pant, emit breath with effort’. The meaning ‘to stink’, attested in Li [0517 (11.39)], is not recorded in either of the entries.

(30) below). This use is closest to the original meaning of the Germanic strong verb **swengwa-* ‘swing’, intransitive-noncausal (meaning after Seebold 1970: 493).²⁷

- OE *geswingan* (6x) ‘beat, whip, chastise (sb.)’ is always transitive.

The following examples illustrate both uses of *swingan*:

(30) *Næs hearpan wyn, [...] ne god hafoc geond sæl swingeð [...]*
 is-not harp’s delight [...] nor good hawk through hall swings [...]
 ‘There is no harp delight, [...] nor a good hawk swings through the hall [...]’
 Beo [0623 (2262)]

(31) *Ða nam Pilatus þone Hælend & swang hyme*
 Then took Pilatus the Saviour and beat him
 ‘Then Pilatus took the Saviour and beat him’
 Jn (WSCp) [0860 (19.1)]

The meanings ‘beat, whip, chastise (sb.)’ are transitive-*noncausal*. However, they could plausibly go back to a transitive-causal (NHEV) use of (*ge*)*swingan* ‘swing (sth.)’ in contexts in which a recipient is added, such as ‘to swing a whip at someone’, which then develops into the attested meaning ‘to beat, to whip (sb.)’, perhaps influenced by the etymologically related nouns *swinge* ‘stripe, stroke’ and *sweng* ‘blow, stroke’.²⁸ Hence, OE *swingan* is a labile-lexicalized verb according to our definition in Section 2: the attested meanings suggest that the original meaning of the verb must have undergone labilization (‘to swing’ intrans-noncaus. and trans-caus.), followed by semantic change (‘to swing (sth.)’ > ‘to swing (sth.) (at sb.)’ > ‘to beat (sb.)’). The latter meaning ‘to beat’ is already attested in early Old English texts, which implies that labilization must have taken place before the first written records.

Table 12a: Number of HEV and NHEV instances of *swingan* and *geswingan*

Verb	Intrans-noncaus. (NHEV)	Trans-caus. (HEV)	Total
<i>swingan</i>	2	58	60
<i>geswingan</i>	0	6	6

²⁷ OE *swingað* for Latin *laborabunt*, in ProgGl 4 [00004 (4)] is probably an error for *swincan* ‘labour’. We thank one of our reviewers for leading us in this direction.

²⁸ Riecke (1996: 603) proposes a similar change from ‘to cause something to swing’ to ‘beat’ for OHG *swenken* ‘beat, whip’, causative to Germ. **swengwa-*.

Table 12b: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *swengan* and *geswengan* by text type and date of composition

Verb	Early prose	Early verse	Late prose	Late verse	Late gloss	Total
<i>swengan</i>	14	1	31	5	7	58
<i>geswengan</i>	0	0	3	0	3	6

- The causative *swengan* (2x) occurs only as intransitive-noncausal (NHEV) ‘dash’.
- OE *geswengan* is attested only once in our corpus (MonCa 1 [0156 (26.19)]), with a similar meaning to *geswengan* ‘beat’.

An example of *swengan* follows:

(32) <i>Pa</i>	<i>swengde</i>	<i>sio</i>	<i>lio</i>	<i>sona</i>	<i>forð</i>
Then	dashed	the	lioness	soon	forth
‘Then the lioness dashed forth immediately’					

LS 35 (VitPatr) [0164 (398)]

The causative OE *swengan* seems to have undergone early lexicalization involving both valency and semantic changes (trans-caus. ‘to swing (sth.)’ > intrans-noncaus. ‘to swing (oneself)’ or ‘to move with a swinging motion’ > ‘to dash’).³⁰ Interestingly, the original meaning and valency of *swengan* is attested in early Middle English; see *MED* s.v. *swengen*, senses 3 (a) ‘to fling (sb. or sth.)’ and (c) ‘to swing (sth.) around’. This leads to conclude that the original meaning of *swengan* might have been current in Old English too, but has not been preserved in the texts.

29 Bosworth-Toller list the meaning ‘to cause to move’ for OE *swengan*, but the passages that illustrate it belong to the Middle English period, e.g. *þe drake rahte ut his tunge and swende hire in* [‘swung her into his mouth’] *ant forswalh into his wide wombe*, in *Seinte Marharete of Antioch* 10, 19. St.Marg.(1) (Bod 34) 24/12, dated by *MED* c1225(c?1200). Citation and text reference from *MED* s.v. *swengen*.

30 As explained in the final paragraphs of Section 2, we adopt Evans and Wilkins’ (2000: 549–550) understanding of lexicalization as a process by which contextual interpretations become coded as distinct, but related, meanings, giving rise to polysemy.

Table 12c: Number of HEV and NHEV instances of *swengan* and *geswengan*

Verb	Intrans-noncaus. (NHEV)	Trans. (HEV)	Total
<i>swengan</i>	2	0	2
<i>geswengan</i>	0	1	1

Table 12d: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *swengan* by text type and date of composition

Verb	Late prose	Total
<i>swengan</i>	2	2

- To conclude, all the verbs of this group show lexicalization, *swingan*, *geswingan* and *geswengan* into the meaning ‘beat’ and *swengan* into ‘dash’. In *swingan*, *geswingan* and *swengan* we assume labile use followed by semantic change.
- OE *swingan* is attested with a meaning close to the original ‘swing’ only in *Beowulf* (see example (30) above), where it means ‘swing, wing’, with HEV (intransitive-noncausal). This supports an early composition of the text, as was the case with OE *stincan* in the previous entry.

3.11 *Wæcnan, weccean, geweccean*

The Old English strong verb *wæcnan* (10x) is always intransitive-noncausal ‘wake up, rise; be born’. The causative *weccean* (21x) is mostly transitive-causal (HEV) ‘wake (sb.) up, raise’ (18x), but it is also used as intransitive-noncausal ‘rise’ (3x). OE *geweccean* (4x) appears always with its HEV, as transitive-causal ‘wake, stir, agitate’. The following example illustrates the intransitive-noncausal use (NHEV) of *weccean*:

(33) *ða* *ðe* *flod* *wecceð* *geond* *hronrade*
 Then that flood arouses through whale-road
 ‘Then the flood rises through the sea’

Gen AB [0068 (201)]

Table 13a: Number of HEV and NHEV instances of *weccean*

Verb	Intrans-noncaus. (NHEV)	Trans-caus. (HEV)	Total
<i>weccean</i>	3	19	22

Table 13b summarizes the distribution of the intransitive (NHEV) occurrences of OE *weccean*.

Table 13b: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *weccean* by text type and date of composition

Verb	Early verse	Late verse	Late gloss	Total
<i>weccean</i>	1	1	1	3

Only one member of this verbal group has become labile, namely the causative *weccean* ‘wake up (sb.) or (sth.); raise’. Textual distribution points to a late onset of labilization in this case.

3.12 *Wegan, gewegan, wecgan*

OE *wegan* (19x) ‘move, bear, carry (sth.)’; (1x) ‘weigh (sth.)’ is always transitive-causal (NHEV) in our corpus (see example (34) below). Its prefixed counterpart *gewegan* (20x) is always intransitive-noncausal (HEV), meaning mostly ‘weigh (intrans.)’; seldom ‘move (intrans.) (1x); wage (war) (1x)’. This is an unusual distribution, since *ge-* is often associated with a transitivity increase (see Section 3.5 above), and not the opposite.

- (34) *Hæfde he & wæg mid hine twiege handseax geættred*
 Had he & carried with him two hand axes poisoned
 ‘He possessed and carried with him two poisoned hand axes’

Bede 2 [0285 (10.138.2)]

As Table 14a below reveals, early labilization of *wegan* is confirmed by ample textual evidence.

Table 14a: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *wegan* by text type and date of composition

Verb	Early prose	Early verse	Late prose	Late verse	Total
<i>wegan</i>	4	5	5	5	19

The causative *wecgan* ‘wag (sth.), shake (sth.)’; ‘move (trans., intrans.)’ is mostly transitive-causal (HEV). The only example with NHEV in our sample is (35) below:

- (35) *Swa hi me gesawon, sona hig wegðan*
 As they me saw, soon they moved
 ‘As they saw me, they moved immediately’

PPs [1002 (108.25)]

Table 14b: Number of HEV and NHEV instances of *wecgan*

Verb	Intrans-noncaus. (NHEV)	Trans-caus. (HEV)	Total
<i>wecgan</i>	1	5	6

Table 14c: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *wecgan* by text type and date of composition

Verb	Late verse	Total
<i>wecgan</i>	1	1

The process of lability in this causative pair is not easy to assess. For the causative OE *wecgan* ‘move’ both valencies are attested – the NHEV in a late text. However, *wegan* ‘move (sth.), carry’ is never documented as intransitive, which is presumably its original valency as the derivational base of causative *wecgan* ‘move (sth.)’ (see Section 1 above).³¹ We have to assume, then, that *wegan* ‘move’ underwent lability before the first written records, with transitive-causal soon gaining ground to intransitive-non-causal use. The latter is recorded for its prefixed counterpart *gewegan*. Finally, the meaning ‘to weigh’ for *wegan* and *gewegan* is attested in our data sample, too. This meaning is common in other Germanic languages, such as Old High German *wegan* (see Riecke 1996: 646) and Old Saxon *wegan*.

³¹ The valency of Germanic **weg-a-* is not straightforward. Seebold (1970: 543), for instance, is ambivalent about it. The reasons why we consider it intransitive, which include typological and historical arguments, are laid out in García García (2005: 93–94 and 2012: 132–133).

3.13 *Windan, gewindan, wendan, gewendan*

- *Windan* (22x) ‘turn, roll, wind’ (intrans-noncaus. and trans-caus.); ‘fly, leap’ (intrans-noncaus.); ‘repair (a wall)’ (trans-noncaus.).
- *Gewindan* (8x) ‘twist, wind’ (intrans-noncaus. and trans-caus.); ‘go about, happen’ (intrans-noncaus.).
- Both verbs are labile in Old English. The transitive-causal use (NHEV) of *windan* is exemplified below in (36).

(36) & *þa* *þenas* *wundon* *þyrnenne* *cynehelm*
 and the servants wound made of thorns crown
 ‘and the servants wound a crown made of thorns’

Jn (WSCp) [0861 (19.2)]

Table 15a: Number of HEV and NHEV instances of *windan* and *gewindan*

Verb	Intrans-noncaus. (NHEV)	Trans-caus. (HEV)	Total
<i>windan</i>	18	4	22
<i>gewindan</i>	7	1	8

Table 15b: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *windan* and *gewindan* by text type and date of composition

Verb	Early prose	Late prose	Late gloss	Total
<i>windan</i>	1	2	1	4
<i>gewindan</i>	0	0	1	1

- *Wendan* (270x both intransitive-noncausal ‘turn (to/from); move; swing; change; convert; go, return’ and transitive-causal ‘turn (to/from); move; change; convert; translate’.
- *Gewendan* (119x) both intransitive-noncausal ‘turn (to/from); go, return’ and transitive causal ‘turn (sth.); change; translate’.

The Old English causatives *wendan* and *gewendan* show multiple meanings, some of which result from the lexicalization of contextual interpretations, such as ‘to translate’ from ‘to turn one language into another’. The meanings ‘to go’ and ‘to return’ could plausibly go back to the reflexive construction ‘to turn oneself to (a place)’, as argued in Section 2 above.

The meaning ‘to go’ for *wendan* is already frequently attested in Old English, especially in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *Orosius*. It spreads in ME *wenden* and

will eventually oust all other senses in PDE *went*, past form of PDE *go*. Both *wendan* and *gewendan* show labile use in Old English in the meanings ‘to turn (to/from)’, ‘to move’, ‘to convert’ and ‘to change’; (37) illustrates NHEV of *wendan*:

(37) *And heora wæter swylce wende to blode*
And their water likewise turned to blood
 ‘And likewise their water turned to blood’

PPs [0871 (104.25)]

Table 15c: Number of HEV and NHEV instances of *wendan* and *gewendan*

Verb	Intrans-noncaus. (NHEV)	Trans-caus. (HEV)	Total
<i>wendan</i>	188	82	270
<i>gewendan</i>	102	17	119

Table 15d: Distribution of occurrences with NHEV of *wendan* and *gewendan* by text type and date of composition

Verb	Early prose	Early verse	Late prose	Late verse	Late gloss	Total
<i>wendan</i>	45	3	115	19	6	188
<i>gewendan</i>	4	1	86	4	7	102

Although the number of words in late prose and late gloss texts in our data sample is comparable, there is a remarkable disparity in the number of attestations of *wendan* in these two text types. This may be related to the fact that the meanings ‘to go, return’, so frequent in other texts such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* MSS C and D, are absent from glossed texts, in which it translates the Latin verbs *(re)verto* ‘turn back’, *(pro)moveo* ‘make headway’ and *muto* ‘to change, modify’, all of which are more conservative, i.e. more closely related to the etymological meaning of *wendan*, ‘to turn’ (trans.) < Germ. **wand-ija-*; see Seebold (1970: 555).

The numerical disparity in *gewendan* is similar. In this case, the verb normally translates the Latin verb *redeo* ‘return’, closer to the meanings ‘go, return’, commonly attested in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* or *Orosius*. However, it is interesting to point out that there are noteworthy differences between the three versions of the gospels. *Gewendan* is more commonly used in the *West Saxon Gospels* (six attestations), which is the only gospel in our corpus that is not a gloss. These examples have a meaning related to ‘go’ or ‘return’. On the other hand, the distribution and attestation of this verb is different in the *Rushworth* and *Lindisfarne Gospels*. *Gewendan* is only attested once in the former and four times in the latter. More interestingly, in these texts *gewendan* is used to translate the verbs *(re)verto*

‘turn back’, *convertō* ‘turn around, reverse’, i.e. meanings which are more related to the original sense of *gewendan* ‘turn’ than the ones it presents in the *West Saxon Gospels*. In the same passages where *gewendan* is used in the *Rushworth and Lindisfarne Gospels*, the *West Saxon Gospels* present other Old English verbs that convey similar meanings to (*re*)*vertō* and *convertō*, namely *gecyrran* ‘turn, convert’ (intrans-noncaus.) or *hwyrfan* ‘turn, turn to’ (intrans-noncaus.).

In conclusion, early labilization is attested for *windan*, *wendan* and *gewendan*, but not for *gewindan*. The differences in the number of attestations between early and late prose for *wendan* are not significant, given the asymmetry of the sample size between early and late texts. However, *gewendan* does show a significant increase of NHEV in late texts.

With respect to text type, labilization of *wendan* is proportionally higher in early prose than in early poetry, but genre differences are levelled out in the late period, where both verse and prose show a remarkable amount of instances with NHEV. Such is not the case with glosses, where *wendan* is much less frequent than in late prose and its NHEV uses are rarer. This difference may have to do with lexical constraints operating in the different genres (an example is the absence of the meaning ‘to go’ for *wendan* in the glosses), rather than with different rates in the spread of labilization.

4 Discussion of the Results of the Data Analysis

In the following paragraphs we will discuss the results obtained from both the individual analysis of each verb and of the quantitative evaluation of the chronological and text type distribution of labile occurrences in global terms. To start with, we are going to present several tables in which the main results of the analyses above are visualized.

Table 16 below gives an overview of the findings of the analysis by verb type just concluded. It lists all labile verbs in the sample in alphabetical order and when – early (E) or late (L) – and in which text type – prose (P), verse (V) and gloss (G) – their NHEV instances are attested. Additionally, it records the exact number of these in the last six columns.

Table 16: Total results by verb type

Verb	NHEV/HEV	E	L	P	V	G	EP	EV	EG	LP	LV	LG
<i>bīgan</i>	1/21		√	√						1		
<i>gebīgan</i>	13/80	√	√	√		√	2			8		3
<i>byrnan</i>	3/70		√	√	√	√				1	1	1
<i>gebyrnan</i>	2/2		√			√						2
<i>bærnan</i>	4/75	√	√	√		√	1			2		1
<i>gecēlan</i>	4/9		√			√						4
<i>hweorfan</i>	3/148		√	√		√				2		1
<i>gehweorfan</i>	23/28	√	√	√	√	√	1			1	8	13
<i>hwyrfan</i>	22/13	√	√	√	√	√	9	1		2	3	7
<i>gehwyrfan</i>	30/51	√	√	√	√	√	7			8	1	14
<i>belifan</i>	2/43		√	√						2		
<i>læfan</i>	2/44		√	√		√				1		1
<i>meltan</i>	2/10	√		√			2					
<i>gemeltan</i>	3/10	√		√			3					
<i>myltan</i>	6/6	√	√	√	√		4				2	
<i>gemyltan</i>	1/10		√	√						1		
<i>smēocan</i>	3/17		√	√						3		
<i>smīcan</i>	3/4	√				√			3			
<i>stencan</i>	4/0		√			√						4
<i>swingan</i>	58/2	√	√	√	√	√	14	1		31	5	7
<i>geswingan</i>	6/0		√	√		√				3		3
<i>swengan</i>	2/0		√	√						2		
<i>weccean</i>	3/19	√	√		√	√		1			1	1
<i>wegan</i>	19/0	√	√	√	√		4	5		5	5	
<i>wecgan</i>	1/5		√		√						1	
<i>windan</i>	4/18	√	√	√		√	1			2		1
<i>gewindan</i>	1/7		√			√						1
<i>wendan</i>	188/82	√	√	√	√	√	45	3		115	19	6
<i>gewendan</i>	102/17	√	√	√	√	√	4	1		86	4	7

The results of the assessment by verb type will be commented on below. Let us just point out that the number of NHEV instances increases in late Old English for most verbs, if they are attested as labile.

Table 17 below presents the instances of verb types and tokens with NHEV in our data sample by date and text type.

Table 17: NHEV types and tokens by date and text type

Early prose	Late prose	Early verse	Late verse	Early gloss	Late gloss
gebīgan (2x)	bīgan (1x)	hwyrfan (1x)	byrnan (1x)	smīcan (3x)	gebīgan (3x)
bāernan (1x)	gebīgan (8x)	swingan (1x)	gehweorfan (8x)		byrnan (1x)
gehweorfan (1x)	byrnan (1x)	weccean (1x)	hwyrfan (3x)		gebyrnan (2x)
hwyrfan (9x)	bāernan (2x)	wegan (5x)	gehwyrfan (1x)		bāernan (1x)
gehwyrfan (7x)	hweorfan (2x)	wendan (3x)	myltan (2x)		gecēlan (4x)
meltan (2x)	gehweorfan (1x)	gewendan (1x)	swingan (5x)		hweorfan (1x)
gemeltan (3x)	hwyrfan (2x)		weccean (1x)		gehweorfan (13x)
myltan (4x)	gehwyrfan (8x)		wegan (5x)		hwyrfan (7x)
swingan (14x)	belīfan (2x)		wecgan (1x)		gehwyrfan (14x)
wegan (4x)	lāefan (1x)		wendan (19x)		lāefan (1x)
windan (1x)	gemyltan (1x)		gewendan (4x)		stencan (4x)
wendan (45x)	smēocan (3x)				swingan (7x)
gewendan (4x)	swingan (31x)				geswingan (3x)
	geswingan (3x)				weccean (1x)
	swengan (2x)				windan (1x)
	wegan (5x)				gewindan (1x)
	windan (2x)				wendan (6x)
	wendan (115x)				gewendan (7x)
	gewendan (86x)				
13 verbs 97 tokens	19 verbs 276 tokens	6 verbs 12 tokens	11 verbs 50 tokens	1 verb 3 tokens	18 verbs 77 tokens

First, we will discuss the chronological distribution of lability by token. The absolute number of NHEV tokens has increased during the Old English period in total (112 in early vs. 403 in late Old English) and in all three text types individually. However, our sample of late Old English texts is also larger than that of early Old English texts. The exact number of words by date and text type is displayed in Table 3 (Section 2) and repeated here with slight modifications as Table 18 for convenience:

Table 18: Number of words per category

	Early prose	Early verse	Early gloss	Late prose	Late verse	Late gloss	Total early	Total late
Word number	401,463	34,361	63,562	517,673	74,912	551,191	499,386	1,143,776

The amount of NHEV examples in each of the six categories in which we have divided the texts in our corpus is presented in the following table as number of tokens per 100,000 words:

Table 19: Number of NHEV tokens per 100,000 words in each text category

Early prose	Late prose	Early verse	Late verse	Early gloss	Late gloss	Total early	Total late
24.16	53.31	34.92	66.74	4.72	13.96	22.43	35.23

These figures imply that there has been a 1.57 increment in the total number of NHEV tokens in late texts with respect to early texts (35.23 vs. 22.43). The increment by text type is 2.2 in prose (24.16 vs. 53.31), 1.91 in verse (34.92 vs. 66.74) and 2.95 in gloss (4.72 vs. 13.96). These results clearly show that labile use by token has increased significantly over the period.

There is also a rise of labile use by verb, as more lexical items are attested with NHEV in late than in early Old English. How the asymmetry in size between early and late texts in the sample affects this parameter is difficult to assess, since more gaps in the transmission are to be expected in a smaller sample than in a larger one, and hence relatively more verbs which were used as labile but not attested as such (more to verb type below).

The proportion of NHEV instances case by case also increases over the period, as can be gleaned from the last six columns of Table 17. More conclusive, however, is the fact that there is a substantial number of verbs which are not attested as NHEV until late Old English, namely *bigan*, *byrgan*, *gecēlan*, *hweorfan*, *belifan*, *læfan*, *gemyltan*, *smēocan*, *stencan*, *geswingan*, *swengan*, *wecgan* and *gewindan*. On the reverse, most verbs which are attested with NHEV in early texts are so in late ones, too, except three, *meltan*, *gemeltan* and *smīcan*, which are not attested in late Old English. This, however, does not constitute disruption of labile use after early Old English in either of the verb meanings and roots involved. Labile use is documented in late prose for all three verbs' counterparts in the causative opposition, namely *myltan*, *gemyltan* and *smēocan*.

To sum up the conclusions about the chronological distribution of labile verbs, the number of NHEV tokens increases in late Old English texts, both for

each verb type in particular and in global terms. All the data clearly suggest that labilization advances during the Old English period. As we will see next, text type analysis supports this conclusion.

With respect to text type, it is noteworthy that there is a great increase in tokens and types between early and late texts, although the degree of that increase varies remarkably from text type to text type. Prose is the text type within which the least degree of variation is found. This is due to the fact that most verb types showing lability are already attested in early prose texts, although six new verbs are recorded in later periods. The number of tokens almost triples, though, most likely due to the high number of attestations of *wendan* especially in late texts such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* MSS C and D. The increase of labile types and tokens is generally much higher in verse and gloss. In this case, however, the answer might lie in the scarce number of texts that have survived. In fact, figures in early verse and gloss are too small to allow any conclusions. In this case, the qualitative analysis of the distribution of verb types according to text type and date does prove more helpful; it follows.

The verbs which are attested in early verse – *hwyrfan*, *swingan*, *wegan*, *wendan* and *gewendan* – are all ‘labile-lexicalized verbs’, which, as was defined in Section 1, have developed meanings in the new valency frame (NHEV) that depart notably from the original sense, to the extent of lexicalization. This points to early labilization, in any case well before the first record of the new meaning. Each of the verbs has been discussed in the individual sections. However, for ease of reference we list below the definitions of each of the mentioned four verbs in Old English texts and the presumed original meaning in Germanic. Underlined meanings show lexicalization or specialization in the NHEV:

- OE *hwyrfan* (trans-caus.) ‘turn (sth.); turn (sth.) to/from/back; return (sth.); change (sth.)’ and (intrans-noncaus.) ‘turn around; turn to/from; return; change; spread; wander’. The original meaning for Germanic **hwarb-ija-* is ‘turn (sth.)’, as a causative to Germanic **hwerb-a-* ‘turn (oneself)’ (Seebold 1970: 282).
- OE *swingan* ‘beat, whip, chastise (sb.)’ (trans.) and ‘wing, soar’ (intrans-noncaus.). The original meaning of the Germanic strong verb **swengwa-* is ‘swing’ (Seebold 1970: 493).
- OE *wegan* ‘move’ (intrans-noncaus.); ‘bear, carry’ (trans-caus.)³²; ‘weigh’ (trans.). The original meaning for Germanic **weg-a-* is ‘move’ (Seebold 1970: 542–543).

³² The meaning ‘to carry, bear’ involves NHEV, but does not depart from the original sense of the root ‘to move’.

- OE *wendan* ‘turn (intrans-noncaus., trans-caus.) (to/from)’; ‘go, return’ (intrans-noncaus.); ‘change, alter (intrans-noncaus., trans-caus.)’; ‘convert (intrans-noncaus., trans-caus.)’; ‘swing (intrans-noncaus.)’; ‘translate’ (trans.).³³ The meaning of the Germanic causative **wand-ija-* is ‘to turn (sth.)’ (Seebold 1970: 555).
- OE *gewendan* ‘turn (intrans-noncaus., trans-caus.) (to/from)’; ‘change (trans-caus.)’; ‘translate’ (trans.); ‘go, return’ (intrans-noncaus.). The same original root meaning as *wendan*.

In contrast to early verse, evidence of lability in early prose is not restricted to labile-lexicalized verbs. Other verbs such as *gebigan*, *bærgan* or *myltan* are attested as labile. These verbs are used with alternating argument frame without meaning change, that is, have not undergone lexicalization in the NHEV. The difference in the degree of semantic specialization in the new valency frame (NHEV) between labile-lexicalized and the rest of labile verbs in our corpus suggests that the former may have started to be used as labile earlier than the latter, as pointed out in Section 2. The restriction of lability to labile-lexicalized verbs in early verse would be in agreement with the arguably conservative nature of poetic language, where some innovations would be incorporated later than in prose. Unsurprisingly, in late verse other verbs such as *byrgan* and *wecgan*, which, arguably, have undergone lability later than labile-lexicalized verbs, are attested as labile.

As for gloss, it is difficult to assess the effect of time, since the sample of early gloss is necessarily small and only one labile verb is attested. Late gloss, on the other hand, shows almost the same labile verb types as late prose, which is the genre with the most lability in Old English. This aligns with the expansion of lability to more verb types just described with respect to Old English verse and may point to the fact that lability was rather well-established in late Old English. Most of the verbs that display NHEV only in gloss are rather rare ones. Their appearance in gloss might thus be linked to translation practice. Verbs like *gebyrgan*, *stencan* or *weccean* with NHEV are attested in our corpus only in gloss, while in prose, the prefixed versions *forbyrgan*, *tostencan* and *aweccean* are attested, and much more commonly recorded, equivalents.

In spite of the fact that the number of NHEV types in late prose and late gloss is rather similar, 19 versus 17, the number of tokens is more than three times higher in the case of late prose. A close look at Table 17 above reveals that the major difference lies in the number of attestations of the verb *wendan*. As commented on when dealing with this verb in Section 3, translation uses do seem to play a role in

³³ The meaning ‘translate’ involves lexicalization, but not NHEV.

the asymmetry between gloss and prose, since in the former *wendan* translates meanings that are close to its etymological meaning, such as *(re)verto* ‘turn back’, *(pro)moveo* ‘make headway’ and *muto* ‘change, modify’ and never translate meanings such as ‘to go’ or ‘to return’, the most common ones in late prose.

Our data can also shed light with regards to the most common direction of the labilization process, i.e. whether it is more frequent for causative verbs to become intransitive-noncausal or for strong verbs to become transitive-causal. Although, as we have shown throughout this paper, attestations of NHEV are common in both groups, the percentage of causative verbs that undergo labilization is higher than that of strong verbs. Whereas 16 out of the 20 (80 %) causative verbs analyzed show NHEV, only 13 out of 22 strong verbs, i.e. 59 %, do so. As far as the number of NHEV attestations in each group is concerned, differences are even higher. Only 26.65 %, 129 out of 484 of the examples with strong verbs in our corpus, show NHEV. That percentage rises to 46.93 %, 383 examples out of 816, in the case of causatives. However, it must be pointed out that such a remarkable disparity might be due, at least partially, to the high number of attestations of *wendan* and *gewendan* both in total terms as well as in terms of NHEV examples only. The issue of the direction of the labilization process would require further research.

Summarizing, the data suggest the following scenario: Labilization was underway before the first Old English records, as suggested by the fact that a non-negligible amount of the verbs in our corpus (that is, members of causative oppositions, which are by definition non-labile in origin) are attested in their NHEV frame already in early prose. However, it is plausible to assume that it was still perceived as an innovation in early Old English, and therefore not fully reflected in poetry, where only labile-lexicalized, and hence early labilized verbs, are attested.³⁴ In late Old English, however, labilization was more consolidated and was reflected in all genres. Thus, the assessment of the text type distribution of labile verbs in Old English leads to the same conclusions as the analysis of their chronological distribution expounded above, namely that labile coding increases significantly in the course of the Old English period.

5 Conclusion and Further Research

In this paper we have studied the spread of lability in Old English by mapping the distribution of labile verbs stemming from causative pairs with respect to date

³⁴ The data for early gloss are too scarce to allow any conclusions.

and text type. We have done so by identifying the clauses in which they show a valency which does not correspond to that of their original morphological pattern (NHEV) and classifying them as ‘late’ vs. ‘early’ and ‘prose’, ‘verse’ or ‘gloss’. Both the chronological and the text type analysis point to the expansion of lability as the period advances, which implies that the tendency towards labilization was operative within the Old English period (seventh to eleventh centuries CE).

This finding is in line with that of previous studies that point out the frequency of labile verbs in Old English when compared to other Germanic languages. At the same time, it excludes the possibility that such frequency should be the result of labilization processes operating exclusively in pre-Old English, before the first historical records, since lability has been shown to increase in the texts of the Old English period itself. This implies, further, that French influence may have reinforced this trend in later stages of English, as Ingham (2020) suggests, but it could not have triggered it. On the other hand, Celtic influence on Old English lability is not ruled out by the findings of this research, but it has been rejected by previous studies (cf. e.g. Poppe 2009).

Labilization is an instance of morphological syncretism. In this sense, the results of the present study evince that morphological loss, although very conspicuous in Middle English, left remarkable traces already in Old English. Other instances of morphological loss in Old English are the reduction of nominal paradigms or the erosion of grammatical gender.

It is hoped that this paper underscores the usefulness of extensive diachronic corpus studies of the Old English period. It is true that the data collection and analysis are rather laborious – the completion of the *DOE* might ease the task. However, such fine-grained assessments provide a more nuanced view of the Old English period and thereby of the history of English, which are sometimes, probably due to limitations of time and space, presented in a rather simplified and monolithic way.

Other results of the paper include the establishment of the valency of all verbs concerned, sometimes against the criteria of previous analyses. Further, our data suggest that labilization is more frequently achieved through the intransitivization of a transitive-causal verb than through the transitivization of an intransitive-noncausal one. Finally, some clues have been procured in relation to a long-standing topic of debate: the date of composition of *Beowulf*. The present analysis has supplied lexical-semantic and morphosyntactic arguments that support early dating of the poem.

The relationship between semantic class membership and lability is an interesting research question. Almost all the labile verbs in our data sample have meanings which can take a labile argument structure in Present-Day English, too, such as ‘to turn’, ‘to bend’, ‘to cool’. The only exception is *læfan* ‘remain; leave’,

which is labile in Old English, but belongs to a semantic class which cannot enter the causal alternation in Present-Day English. The evolution of semantic constraints on labilization from Old English to the present is a promising path of research. Another issue worth pursuing is the role played by the use of the reflexive pronoun in the labilization process.³⁵

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