

## The Adverbs of Degree in Old and Middle West Germanic Languages

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Adverbs of degree are among the most frequent words in the lexicon of most languages. These can be used to strengthen a statement (e.g. *very*, *exceedingly*), reinforce it (e.g. *completely*, *fully*), or weaken it (e.g. *somewhat*, *hardly*), and each adverb comes with its own set of semantic and syntactic restrictions on its usage. The former includes the lexical category of the modified word, and the latter includes the inherent polarity of the modified word (e.g. Klein 1998: 8-14, 71, 85). For example, *very* can modify adjectives, as is shown in (1a) but not verbs (1b), and *a little* can only be used with inherently negative words but not positive ones (1c).

- (1) a. It is very good.  
b. I appreciate it \*very.  
c. The door is a little rude/\*polite

For the Germanic languages, research has primarily focussed on the Modern period, and earlier stages of the languages have been somewhat neglected. While some research has been done mainly for English (e.g. Méndez-Naya 2003), a comparative study covering West Germanic as a whole has not yet been performed. As such, this study provides an overview of the adverbs of degree in the early West Germanic languages (Old and Middle English, Old and Middle High German, Old Saxon, Middle Low German, Old Frisian, and Middle Dutch). It examines their usage and how they changed over time, which will provide new insights in the early periods and how adverbs of degree develop.

The data were collected from various corpora: the YCOE (Taylor, Warner, Pintzuk & Beths 2003), the YCOEP (Pintzuk & Plug 2001), the *Old German Reference Corpus* (Donhauser, Gippert, & Lühr 2018), the REN (ReN Team 2019), the REM (Wegera, Wich-Reif, Dipper & Klein 2016), the *Corpus Gysseling* (Gysseling 2013), the *Corpus Old Frisian* (Van de Poel 2019), and more. For Old Saxon, Old High German, Old Frisian, and Middle Dutch, all information was collected manually. For the remainder, R (R Core Team 2020) scripts were used. For adverbs with a large number of attestation, only adverb-modified word combinations that occur at least five times were manually annotated.

Based on these data, two distinct systems can be identified in early West Germanic: a North Sea type and a Continental type. The former is exemplified by Old English and Old Saxon, which both have an extremely similar set of adverbs in which *swīpe/swīðo* ‘very, strongly, quickly’ dominates the adverbs of high degree, and they also have a set of common adverbs with deviant usage (e.g. *fela/filu* ‘much, very’, *gearwe/garo* ‘wholly’). The Continental type is represented in the early period by Old High German, in which *fīlu* dominates the adverbs of high degree. Later languages like Early Middle Dutch fit into this system as well, as it features *vēle* ‘much, very’ with a similar usage, and *harde* ‘firmly, very’. The latter is also found in Old and Middle High German as *harto/harte*.

A number of shared diachronic changes can be observed as well. For example, the rise of the adverb *sêre* ‘sorely, very’ can be observed, which is marginally attested in Old High German and Old Saxon, but dominates in Middle Dutch and Middle Low German, and its usage increases in Middle High German by the century. Low German in particular appears to undergo radical changes, as the system of adverbs of degree in Middle Low German bears little resemblance to the one in Old Saxon. By contrast, High German remains relatively stable. Old Frisian is generally of the North Sea type but participated in this shared development as well, as *sêre* is also common there.

As such, a comparative study on the adverbs of degree also provides insights into the developments of the West Germanic languages and their relationship.

**Keywords:** Historical linguistics, Intensification, Corpus linguistics, Germanic linguistics, Historical semantics

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