Old English Words for 'to die'

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The typical terms for 'to die' in Old English are *sweltan, steorfan,* and the periphrastic *wesan/weorðn dead*. Furthermore, the high frequency of *forðferan* makes us aware of euphemism in Old English. In this paper, Old English words for 'to die' are examined from the viewpoint of Old English equivalents of Latin originals. As a result, we find that *wesan/weorðan dead* is the common expression for death in Old English. *Forðferan* is also a frequent word meaning to die, and serves as a euphemism/honorific expression in Old English. On the other hand, the usage of *sweltan* and *steorfan* have been gradually circumscribed, and their meanings come to be specified.

Key words: Old English, to die, usage, euphemism

1．Introduction

Some Modern English verbs of motion, such as *pass, go, leave, depart,* are used to express 'to die,' as the figurative use of locative movement. This usage, needless to say, can be seen in Old English verbs of motion.

Weman (1933)[1] shows that such verbs as *faran, feran, gewitan, leoran, gangan/gan, eode, wendan, hweorfan, sceacan* and their compounds can be used euphemistically for *die*. The primary significance of these verbs are as follows: (1) *faran, feran, gewitan, leoran,* 'to set out,' 'to go,' (2) *gangan/gan, eode,* 'to go on foot,' (3) *wendan, hweorfan,* 'to turn,' (4) *sceacan,* 'to toss,' 'to move to and fro.'

Among these Old English verbs of motion, I have argued that *faran* and *feran* semantically differ from each other.[2] Although both *faran* and *feran* have an overlapping range of sense, *faran* covers not only the actual movement such as 'coming and going,' but also the figurative transition such as change of state, the meaning of which leads to the establishment of Modern English *fare*. *Feran,* in contrast, focuses on departure, which is likely one of the reasons that it becomes obsolete. However, the core sense of *feran* offers the key to an understanding why *forðferan* occurs in order to mean 'to die.'

The typical Old English verbs for 'to die' are *sweltan* and *steorfan,* which are supplemented by the periphrastic *wesan/weorðan dead,* but we also find *forðferan* for 'to die' highly frequently in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,* as Bately points out.[3]

Samuels (1972) observes that "It seems probable that *sweltan* and *steorfan* were euphemisms for **dēgan,* and that they had originally in Germanic meant 'burn slowly' and 'grow stiff' respectively."[4]

東京家政学院大学現代生活学部児童学科

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* [5], Modern English *die* has developed from early Middle English *dēȝen, dēghen,* which correspond to Old Norse *deyja*. In Old English, there is no instance of the equivalent for **dēgan*. It is considered that the word has been lost in early Old English and re-adopted in late Old English or early Middle English from Old Norse. Burchfield (1985) states that "The unrecorded verb *degan* … almost certainly existed in Old English, … but it was avoided in writing until the taboo on it was lifted by some releasing mechanism soon after the Norman Conquest."[6] His view supports Samuels'remarks.

The first written record of *dēȝen* occurs in the *History of the Holy Rood-tree* (*c*1135[7]). After the reintroduction of *dēȝen>die, sweltan>swelte(n)* and *steorfan>sterue(n)* were specialized in the original meanings for ʻto swoon or faint with heatʼ and ʻto die of hunger or coldʼ respectively[8].

Now let us consider the subject from another aspect. *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*[9] shows that Latin *decēdĕre, defungi (<dēfungor), exspiro, mŏrĭor, ŏbĕo* are rendered into *forðferan* and *sweltan*. It is valid to understand Old English vocabulary by setting Latin originals as criteria.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the distribution and usage of Old English words for ʻto dieʼ as the translation from Latin verbs. The texts used here are the Skeat's *West Saxon Corpus Gospels (WSCp)*[10], which serve to look into Old English equivalents for Latin originals.

2   Historical Development of Synonyms for *die*

According to *A Thesaurus of Old English (TOE)*[11], Old English synonyms for ʻto dieʼ are semantically classified as below. *Steorfan, sweltan and forðferan* are put in boxes for the sake of convenience.

02.02.03 To die, perish: ācwelan, āswindan, gefeallan, forswealtan, forweorþan, (ge)losian
.To die: ādēadian, āsteorfan, āsweltan, becwelan, belīfan, cwelan, dēadian, dēagan, (ge)drēosan, geendian, forweorþan (tō), ⎡steorfan⎤ , ⎡sweltan⎤ , oþcwelan
..Involving journey: gefāran, gerēran, fēran forþ, forfaran, forēran, forlætan, forsīþian, forþ(ge) faran, ⎡forþ(ge)fēran⎤ , forþgelēoran, gegān, glīdan, hweorfan, lēoran, tōstencan, wītan, gewītan of līce
..Suggesting loss: feorh āgiefan, georh losian, feorh gesellan, līf geendian, linnan ealdre, unǽtnessa gebīdan
..Involving separation from the soul: gāst āgiefan, gǽst ofgiefan, gāst onsendan, sāwlian
..Forfeiting life: hēafdes þolian
..In battle: æt hilde gedrēosan, āfeallan, (ge)cringan, (ge)feallan, gehrēosan, licgan
..By burning: swelan
..By drowning: ādrincan, (ge)drencan
...And choking: underdrencan
..To perish, founder: gedeorfan

We can recognize from this classification that *steorfan* and *sweltan* simply mean to die, and *forðferan* connotes the departure to the afterlife.

Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary (HTE)[12] gives us the historical development. The following division of entries in *HTE* into four groups will therefore serve our purpose: (1) Old

English words which disappear after the Old English period; (2) Old English words which survive after the Old English period; (3) words which occur during the Middle English period; (4) words which occur during the Modern English period.

According to *HTE, forðferan* is an Old English term, which disappears after the Old English period. It is until *a*1657 that *steorfan>starve* means to die. After that, *starve* comes to mean 'to die of hunger.' *Sweltan>swelt* survives until *c*1300, and after *c*1375 it is used as dialect. *Die,* as mentioned above, has been employed for meaning 'to die' since *c*1135.

3．Old English Equivalents for Latin Words Meaning 'to die'

In the *WSCp, decēdĕre and defungi* do not occur, but *mŏrĭor, exspiro* and *ŏbĕo* have Old English equivalents. *Mŏrĭor* is rendered into *forðferan* 3 times, *sweltan* 22 times, and *wesan/weoðan dead* 37 times. *Exspiro* is translated into *forðferan* 3 times, and *ŏbĕo* into *forðferan* once.

(1) *Mŏrĭor* is rendered into *forðferan* 3 times.

Mk	15.44	Ða wundrode pilatus gif he þa gyt forð-ferde;
		[(Pilate) asked the centurion if He (=Jesus) had been dead for some time.]
Lk	8.42	for-þam he hæfde áne dohtor. nean twelf winre 7 seo forð-ferde.
		[because his only daughter, about twelve, was dying.]
Lk	16.22	Ða wæs geworden þæt[13] se wædla forð-ferde [The begger (=Lazarus) died,]

(2) *Mŏrĭor* is rendered into *sweltan* 22 times.

Mt	15.04	se þe wyrgð hys fæder 7 modor swelte se deaþe;
		[He who curses father or mother must suffer death.]
Mt	26.35	witudlice þeah þe is scyle sweltan mid þe.
		[(Peter said to Him,) Even if I must die with You,]
Mk	7.10	7 se ðe wyrigþ his fæder 7 his modor. Swelte se deaþe;
		[whoever curses father or mother, let him be executed.]
Mk	9.44	þar hyra wyrm ne swylt [where their worm never ceases]
Mk	9.46	þar hyra wyrm ne swylt [where their worm never ceases]
Mk	9.48	þar hyra wyrm ne swylt. [where their worm never ceases]
Lk	20.36	ne ofer þæt[13] sweltan ne magon. [for they cannot die again]
Jn	4.49	far ær min sunu swelte. [(Sir,) do come down before my boy dies.]
Jn	6.50	þæt[13] ne swelte se ðe of him ytt; [so that anyone who eats of it may not die.]
Jn	8.21	7 ge sweltaþ on eowre synne. [but you will die in your sin.]
Jn	8.24 (2)	þæt[13] ge sweltað on eowrum synnum gif ge ne gelyfað þ ic hit sý. ge sweltað
		on eowre syne; [that you would die in your sins. For if you do not believe that
		I am He, you will die in your sins.]
Jn	11.16	uton gan 7 sweltan mid him; ["Le us go too, so that we may die with Him."]
Jn	11.26	7 ne swylt nan þara þe leofað 7 gelyfð on me;
		[and no one who lives and believes in Me will ever die.]
Jn	11.50	þæt[13] us ys betere þæt[13] an man swelte for folce
		[it is better for you to have one person die on behalf of the people,]

Jn   11.51   þæt[13] se hælend sceolde sweltan for ðære þeode.
              [(Caiaphas foretold) how Jesus was to die for the nation.]
Jn   12.33   7 tacnode hwylcum deaðe he wolde sweltan;
              [(Jesus) signifying what kind of death He was to die.]
Jn   18.14   þæt[13] hyt wære betere þæt[13] an man swulte for folc;
              [one man's death would benefit the people.]
Jn   18.32   þa he geswutelode hwylcon deaðe he swulte;
              [that He (had spoken) showing what sort of death He was to die.]
Jn   19.07   7 be ure .æ. He sceal sweltan [and by the Law He ought to die,]
Jn   21.23 (2) þæt[13] se leorning-cniht ne swylt. 7 ne cwæð se hælend to him ne swylt he.
              [that that desciple would not die; however, Jesus did not say, "He will not die,"]

(3) *Mŏrĭor* is rendered into *wesan/weoðan dead* 37 times.
Mt   8.32   on-ræse niwel on þa sǽ 7 hig wurdon deade on þam wætere;
              [(and the whole herd) rushed down the precipice into the sea and perished
              in the waters.]
Mt   9.24   nys þys mæden dead soðlice ac neo slæpð [for the girl is not dead but asleep.]
Mt   22.24   gif hwa dead syg 7 bearn næbbe [if someone dies childless]
Mt   28.04   7 wæron gewordene swylce hig deade wæron;
              [The sentries shook for fear of him (=angel) and became like corpses.]
Mk   5.35   7 cwædon; Ðín dohtor is dead.
              [(those from the ruler's house who) told him, "Your daughter is dead.]
Mk   5.39   nis þis mæden na dead ac heo slæpð; [The child is not dead but asleep.]
Mk   9.26 (2) eode of him. 7 he wæs swylce he dead wære; Swa þæt[13] manega cwædon
              soðlice he is dead; [he came out (from the boy). The boy looked like a
              corpse, so that manu declared that he was dead;]
Mk   12.19   moyses us wrat. gif hwæs broðor dead bið
              [Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies,]
Mk   12.20   7 wearð dead ná læfedum sæde; [and died without offspring.]
Mk   12.21   And þa nam se oðer hi. 7 wearð dead.
              [Then the second married her and died (withoug leaving offspring).]
Lk   7.15   Ða arás se þe dead wæs. 7 ongan sprecan.
              [The lifeless one sat up and began to speak,]
Lk   8.52   Soþlice nis þis mæden dead. ac heo slæpð. [She is not dead but asleep.]
Lk   8.53   Ða tældon hig hyne 7 wiston þæt[13] heo dead wæs;
              [But knowing that she was dead they laughed at Him.]
Lk   15.24   for-þam þes min sunu wæs dead [for this my son was dead]
Lk   15.32   for-þam þes þin broðor wæs dead 7 he ge-edcucede
              [for this your brother was dead and he has come to life;]
Lk   16.22   Þa wearð we welega dead [The rich man also died]
Lk   20.28   gif hwæs broðor byð dead 7 wíf hæbbe. [When a man's married brother dies
              childless, the brother shall take the woman]

Lk 20.29 7 se forma nam wif. 7 wæs dead butan bearnum;
[the first of whom (=brothers) took a wife and died childless.]

Lk 20.30 Ða nam oðer hig 7 wæs dead butan bearne;
[The second also took her, and died childless.]

Lk 20.31 7 nán sǽd ne lǽfdon 7 wæron deade. [and they died childless.]

Lk 20.32 Þa ealra ytemest wæs þæt[13] wíf dead; [At last the woman died too.]

Jn 6.49 ure fæderas æton heofunlicne mete on westene 7 hig synd deade;
[Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert and they died.]

Jn 6.58 na swa swa ure fæderas æton heofonlicne mete 7 deade wæron;
[not such as your fathers ate and then died;]

Jn 8.52 abraham wæs dead 7 þa witegan. [Both Abraham and the prophets died.]

Jn 8.53 (2) Cwyst þu þæt[13] þu sy mærra þonne ure fæder abraham. se wæs dead 7 þa
witegan wæron (sic) deade. [You are not superior to our father Abraham,
who died, are You? And the prphets died.]

Jn 11.14 Ða cwæð se hælend openlice to him. Ladzarus ys dead.
[The Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead;]

Jn 11.21 gif þu wære her nære min broðor dead.
[if You had been here, my brother would not have died.]

Jn 11.25 7 lif se ðe ge-lyfð on me þeah he dead sy he leofað.
[He who believes in Me will live even when he dies.]

Jn 11.32 gif ðu wære her nære min broðor dead;
[if You had benn here, my brother would not have died.]

Jn 11.37 don eac þæt[13] þes nære dead; [(Could He) not make him (=Lazarus) die?]

Jn 11.39 Ða cwæð martha to him þæs swustor þe þar dead wæs
[Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him,]

Jn 11.44 7 sona stop forð se ðe dead wæs [Out came the one who had died,]

Jn 12.01 þar lazarus wæs dead [where Lazarus was dead]

Jn 12.24 (2) þæt[13] hwætene corn wunað ana buton hyt fealle on eorþan 7 sy dead; Gif hit [byð]
dead hit bringð mycelne wæstm; [unless a grain of wheat drops into the earth and
dies, it remains single, but if it dies, it produce a rich yield.]

Jn 19.33 7 gesawon þæt[13] he dead wæs [and saw that He was already dead,]

(4) *Mŏrĭor* is rendered into *wesan sweltendlic* once.

Lk 7.02 þa wæs sumes hundred-mannes þeowa untrum. Se wæs sweltendlic.
[There a centurion's slave was ill to the point of death;]

(5) Exspiro is rendered into *forðferan* 3 times.

Mk 15.37 Se hælend þa ascende his stefne 7 forðferde.
[But having uttered a strong cry, Jesus died.]

Mk 15.39 þæt[13] se hælend swa clypiende forð-ferde.
[how He died in that way, exclaimed,]

Lk 23.46 7 þus cweþende he forþferde; [And with these words He died.]

(6) *Ŏbĕo* is rendered into *forðferan* once.

Mk   15.44   Ða wundrode pilatus gif he þa gyt forð-ferde;
                  [But Pilate wondered whether He was already dead;]

The first point to notice is that *steorfan* does not appear as an equivalent of Latin verbs for 'to die.' In fact, it does not occur in the four Gospels at all, and there is room for further investigation. However, I leave the matter open here.

The most common expression for dying is *wesan/weorðan dead,* and *sweltan* follows. The subjects of them cover everything from human beings to worms. On the contrary, *forðferan* seems to be restricted to the death of Jesus Christ or holy persons. These results coincide with those of my research concerning the word change in *The Peterborough Chronicle*[14].

4. *Forðferan* in *The Peterborough Chronicle*[15]

The Peterborough Chronicle (Bodleian MS., Laud 636), one of the existing seven manuscripts of *the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles,* is linguistically divided into three periods. The annals prior to 1121 are a copy of an older chronicle, and those after 1122 are originally written in Peterborough[16]. The annals from 1122 to 1131 are called the First Continuation, and those from 1132 to 1154 the Final Continuation[17]. The annals up to 1121 are written in Standard West Saxon, and therefore they are regarded as Old English[18]. The language of the First Continuation keeps the characteristics of West Saxon *Schriftsprache,* but some traits of East Midland dialects begin to appear. The language of the Final Continuation is no longer regarded as Old English but early Middle English[19].

The frequencies of the expressions denoting 'to die' in the three periods are listed below.

1-1121

forðferan (189), *gefaran* (7), *sweltan* (6), *þrowian* (6), *wesan/weorðan dead* (5), *forfaran* (4), *forðfran* (3), *forweorðan* (3), *dead* (3), *forðgefaran* (2), *faran* (2), *æfter his dæi* (2), *dead* (2), *forlætan þis lif* (2), *geendian his dagas* (2), *gewitan* (2), *æfter forsiðe* (1), *æfter forðsiðe* (1), *æfter his ende* (1), *his ende dæg* (1), *losian þises lifes* (1), *forðgewitan* (1), *feallan* (1), *gefeallan* (1)

1122-1131

forðferan (8), *wesan/weorðan dead* (3), *sweltan* (2), *steorfan* (1), *cwealm* (1), *æfter his dæi* (1)

1132-1154

weorðan dead (5), *forðferan* (1), *steorfan* (1), *æfter his dæi* (1), *drepan* (1)

As for *forðferan* and *wesan/weorðan,* almost all cases their subjects are religious persons, kings, and the aristcracy. *Sweltan,* on the other hand, is frequently used when the ordinary people and animals die. *Steorfan* occurs once in First and Final Continuation respectively, and the meaning is that the public dies of hunger.

We notice that *forðferan* remarkably declines around 1135, when the first written record of *dēȝen* appears.

5．Conclusion

All in all, *wesan/weorðan dead* is the common expression for death in Old English. It may be a kind of 'colorless expression' and that is why it is preferred in every situation. *Forðferan* is also a frequent word to mean to die, and serves as euphemism/honorific expression in Old English. As we can see from the word formation, *forðferan* is a compound of *forð + feran* 'to go forth.' It is easy to understand that the literal sense of locative movement becomes the figurative or metaphorical movement, which means death. However the word comes to disappear with the decline of *feran*.

The usage of *sweltan* and *steorfan* has been gradually circumscribed, and their meanings comes to be specified. Considering their original Germanic meanings, *sweltan* 'to burn slowly' and *steorfan* 'to grow stiff,' may have been too harsh and therefore sometimes un-acceptable. That is why other euphemistic expressions would be necessary.

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[1] Weman (1933).

[2] Unebe (1998).

[3] Bately (1978), p. 121.

[4] Samuels (1972), pp. 77-78.

[5] *OED* (2009), die. v^1.

[6] Burchfield (1985), pp. 16-17.

[7] According to *MED*, the date is c1175.

[8] *OED* (2009), *die, v^1*. Samuels (1972), p. 78.

[9] Bosworth and Toller (1898; rpt. 1972), and Toller and Campbell (1921).

[10] Skeat (1871-87; rpt. 1970). According to M. C. Morrell (1965), it is believed that the Latin text on which the *West Saxon Gospels* were based was not the Vulgate, but the exact Latin original is not clarified. Although there may remain some problems about the Latin original, I have used the Vulgate as the Latin text here for convenience. The edition is *Nouum Testamentum Latine* by J. Wordsworth and H. J. White (London: The British and Foreign Bible Sciety).

[11] J. Roberts and C. Kay with Lynne Grundy (1995). *To die*.

[12] C. Kay, J. Roberts, M. Samuels, I. Wotherspoon (2009). 01.02.02 (vi) Die.

[13] An abbreviation (þ with stroke) is used here.

[14] Unebe (1989).

[15] Plummer and Earle (1892). G. N. Garmonsway trans. (1953) is also consulted.

[16] Bennett and Smithers (1968), p.201.

[17] Clark (1958), pp. xi ff.

[18] Clark (1958), p. xxxxix.

[19] Clark (1958), p. xl. Bennet and Smithers (1968), pp. 374-76. K. Miyabe (1974), p. 131.

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