Wend in Early Middle English

Noriko Unebe

The Modern English word go undergoes twofold suppletion in its history. In Old English, the preterite of gan was lost and supplied with eode from a lost form equivalent to Gothic iddja, the past tense of gaggan ‘to go.’ After the Old English period, eode became ȝede, yede, yode, etc., and the OED states that these forms died out in the 15th century and were superseded by went, the past tense of wend (< OE wendan ‘to turn’). The purpose of this paper is to focus on the verbs of motion which mean ‘to go’ in the transition from Old English to Middle English, and to locate their distribution. As a result, we may conclude that wend began to lose the connotation of ‘turning’ by the end of the Old English period.

Key words: Early ME wend semantic change

1. Introduction

Among Modern English verbs of motion, go is quite remarkable when we trace its history. It is clear that Modern English go was established after a series of changes. In the first place, we should notice its semantic change. As the Oxford English Dictionary [OED] states, go “had formerly a special application to walking as distinguished from other modes of progression; possibly this may be the primitive sense.”1 In the course of time, however, Old English gan gains the general sense of going, and it wins a notable victory over faran, feran and gewitan, the primary sense of which is ‘to set out, to go.’2 As for feran and gewitan, they ultimately disappeared from English vocabulary. In the second place, we should not overlook the suppletive past tense form of the word go.3 That is, Modern English go undergoes twofold suppletion in its history. In Old English, the preterite of gan was lost and supplied with eode from a lost form equivalent to Gothic iddja, the past tense of gaggan ‘to go.’4 After the Old English period, eode became ȝede, yede, yode, etc., and according to the OED, these forms died out in the 15th century and were superseded by went, the past tense of wend (< OE wendan ‘to turn’).5 As for the replacement of eode by went and its development, Lass (1992) says that wente spread from north to south in the 13th and 14th centuries, and gradually superseded yede/yode.6 Welna (2001) also argues that the prevalence of went over eode becomes marked during the 14th century.7 We can see from these arguments that went was regarded as the past tense form of go by the end of the 14th century. In other words, went came to be included in the paradigm of go during the Middle English period. However, the question of why went came to be adopted is still open.
The purpose of this paper is to focus on the verbs of motion which mean ‘to go’ in the transition from Old English to Middle English, and to locate their distribution. The primary texts examined here are the *History of the Holy Rood-tree* (c1175) by Napier⁸ and the *Twelfth-Century Homilies* (c1175) by Belfour⁹, both in MS. Bodley 343, and the *Vices and Virtues* in MS. Stow 34 (*olm* 240) (a1225) by Holthausen.¹⁰ The results in MS. Bodley 343 are compared with those in MS. Stow 34.

Ker describes that MS. Bodley 343 is a large collection of homilies, forty-eight of which are taken from Ælfric’s two series of *Sermones catholici*.¹¹ The *History of Holy Rood-tree* is in art. 12 (ff. 14⁰-20⁰), and the *Twelfth-Century Homilies* in arts. 7-10 (ff. 4⁰-11⁰), 28-29 (ff. 56⁰-60), 54 (ff. 107⁰-110), 61 (ff. 121⁰-122), 77-80 (ff. 155-164⁰), 82-83 (ff. 166⁰-167⁰). Ker observes that all the homilies published by Belfour in 1909 probably date back to Anglo-Saxon times. Napier says that MS. Bodley 343 is a folio MS. containing 205 leaves, and it seems to have been written about the third quarter of the 12th century.¹² As mentioned above, this MS. is a collection of homilies, and nearly all of which are copies of preconquest originals. According to *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, the *Vices and Virtues* may have been composed 1175-1225.¹³ Although in early studies some called the dialect Kentish and others Southwestern, the *Middle English Dictionary* [MED] places it in the East Midlands.¹⁴

Miyabe (1980) states that the *Vices and Virtues* is a treatise on various subjects in a framework of dialogue.¹⁵

### 2. Historical Development of *wend*

Before taking up the main subject, we have to inquire into *wend* from several points of view. *Wend* is not a word peculiar to English but is common among the Germanic languages. OE *wendan* corresponds to OFris *wenda*, WFris *weine*, wine, NFris *wén*, wän, MDu and Du *wenden* ‘to turn, to tack,’ causal of *winden*, OS *wendian*, MLG and LG *wenden*, LG *wendian*, OHG *wentan*, MHG and G *wenden*, causal of *winden*, ON and Icel *venda* ‘to wend, turn, change,’ causal of *vinda*, Norw *venda*, Sw *vända*, causal of *vinda*, Da *vende*, causal of *vinde*, Goth *wandjan*, causal of *windan*.¹⁶

Skeat explains that Modern English *wend* means ‘to go, take one’s way,’ and the literal sense was originally ‘to make to wind,’ and it is the causal of *wind*.¹⁷ He also says that it is “now little used except in the pt. t. *went*, which is used in place of the pt. t. of *go*. When used, it is gen. in the phr. ‘to wend one’s way[].’” However, the British National Corpus [BNC] presents usage besides ‘to wend one’s way.’¹⁸ Sixteen out of eighteen examples under *wend*, and thirteen out of sixteen examples under *wended* show the phrase ‘to wend(ed) one’s way,’ but other examples are as follows:

- **wend**
  - (1) They *wend off across* the dully shining floor of the ballroom, heading approximately for the stairs. (*Complicity.* Banks, Iain. 1993)
  - (2) Lady Usk watched him *wend a hasty path towards* his wife and turned back to the window to find that Miss Kyte was standing stock-still on the terrace, staring in at her. (*Hidden Flame.* Bailey, Elizabeth. 1993)

- **wended**
  - (1) Indeed, only Occulobe-enhanced eyesight could perceive such traces of the medical sculpting which had once made them Marines, as if the thinnest of pink veins *wended across* their bulging
rock-hard melanchromic flesh, like a tracery in some golden marble which could become ochre-brown, which could become jet-black.  (*Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine.* Watson, Ian. 1993)

(2) If news wended to Spittals that she had any more interest in the Mills murder she would be suspended immediately.  (*A Midsummer Killing.* Barnes, Trevor. 1991)

(3) He wended out to gather flowers.  (*Letters in the Dark.* Lomas, Herbert. 1986)

From the semantic classification of OE *wendan* in *A Thesaurus of Old English* [**TOE**]^{19}, it is obvious that the core meaning of *wendan* pertains to ‘change of things/situations,’ in which ‘turning’ is included. Furthermore, *TOE* classification shows us that both *(ge)gan* and *(ge)wendan* are synonymous when they mean ‘to go, progress, travel (usually on land)’ [05.12.01] and ‘to depart, leave, set out’ [05.12.03.03]. In other words, *gan* and *wendan* semantically overlap each other to some extent during the Old English period, the fact of which may offer a key to the merger of *gan* and *wendan*.

In order to trace the historical semantic change of *wend*, the *Historical Thesaurus of English* [**HTE**]^{20} data, especially the verbs of motion in the categories of Motion and Travel, are examined here. Table 1 shows the rearranged data of *wend* inclusive of compounds and phrases. ‘Date’ includes the first and the last date of use as recorded in the *OED*. A dash indicates continuous use and a plus mark is for dates separated by approximately 150 years. The words and meanings are arranged in chronological order based on the first date of use. From this table, we can find that *wend* ‘to go away,’ ‘to depart/leave/go away,’ ‘to move in a certain direction’ and *wend* (one’s) way ‘to direct one’s course’ have been used constantly for a long time. The meanings such as ‘to change direction of movement (of)’ and ‘to revolve/rotate’ in OE *on; a; a-genbe; ed; ge-wendan* disappear after the Old English period. *Wend again and rewend* retain the old meaning ‘to return’ after the 12th century, but both of them are also transient: the last date of the former is c1430 and the latter occurs once in 1616. Instead, the senses for ‘going away/departing/leaving,’ ‘travelling/proceeding,’ ‘moving in a certain direction,’ ‘directing one’s course,’ which we may regard as a part of Modern English *go*, survive much longer. To sum up, it seems reasonable to suppose that the core meaning of *wend* begins to deviate from the original one during the early transition period.

3. **Verbs Denoting ‘going’ and ‘turning (changing direction)’ in Each Text**

Here are listed the verbs denoting ‘going’ and ‘turning’ in each text. Numbers in parentheses show page and line.

(1) *The History of Holy Rood-tree*

awiten (pret) (16.1): aweiȝ awat ‘went away’
faren (inf) (4.22, 6.29, 12.12, 20.6, 20.21, 24.2, 30.29, 30.32): faren ‘to go, pass, move, travel’
faren (ger) (34.24): farende ‘travelling’
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Category</th>
<th>Sub Category</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cause to rise (raise)</td>
<td>upawendan</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change direction of movement of (cause to deviate from course)</td>
<td>awendan</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change direction of movement of</td>
<td>onwendan</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change direction of movement of (cause to deviate from)</td>
<td>onwendan of</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return</td>
<td>agenbewendan</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return</td>
<td>awendan</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return</td>
<td>edwendan</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return</td>
<td>gewendan</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return</td>
<td>onwendan</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revolve/rotate</td>
<td>(ge)wendan</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revolve/rotate</td>
<td>(ge)wendan</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel/proceed/make one’s way</td>
<td>i-wende&lt;gewendan</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>c1275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel/proceed/make one’s way</td>
<td>i-wende&lt;gewendan</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>a1300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depart/leave/go away</td>
<td>awend&lt;awendan</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>c1305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go away</td>
<td>awend&lt;awendan</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>c1305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depart/leave/go away</td>
<td>wend&lt;(ge)wendan</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>1603+1819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go away</td>
<td>wend&lt;wendan</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>1603+1819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel/proceed/make one’s way</td>
<td>wend&lt;(ge)wendan</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>1613/16+1775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel/proceed/make one’s way</td>
<td>wend&lt;wendan</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>1635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go away</td>
<td>(go away in all directions)</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>c1175-c1205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rise/go up</td>
<td>upwend</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>c1200-a1400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return</td>
<td>wend again</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>c1205-c1430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move in a certain direction</td>
<td>wend</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>c1205-1622+1816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct one’s course</td>
<td>wend (one’s) way</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>c1250-a1586+1810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move over/ across/ through/ past</td>
<td>overwend</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>c1250-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel/proceed/make one’s way</td>
<td>wend one’s street</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>a1300-1481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel/proceed/make one’s way</td>
<td>ywende</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>c1300-1393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writhe/ twist</td>
<td>wend</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>a1310-1561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move the body/a member</td>
<td>wend</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>1340/70-a1400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall (..in a certain state)</td>
<td>wend to ground</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>c1430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return</td>
<td>(..spec. of person/animal)</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>1616</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
faren (pret) (2.4, 2.13, 2.20, 4.31, 4.32, 14.9, 22.21, 28.29): ferde, ferden ‘went, proceeded’
faren (pret) (18.34): ofer for ‘crossed over’
gon (pret) (4.22, 6.30, 8.27, 10.19, 10.27, 18.4, 18.5, 18.17, 22.26, 24.9, 24.27, 26.8, 28.8, 30.4, 30.16, 32.31): eode, eoden ‘went’
gon (imp) (6.11, 10.18, 14.5): ga ‘go’
gon (inf) (24.36): gan ‘to go’
iwiten (pret) (12.23, 22.1): ȝewat, ȝewitan ‘departed, went’
wenden (inf) (16.33, 24.21): wendan, wendon ‘to go’
wenden (pret) (16.15): ham wende ‘went homewards’
wharven (pret) (18.22): þonon hwurfon ‘turned away’
witen (pret) (26.23): witan ‘departed’

(2) The Twelfth-Century Homilies
awenden (pret) (104.20): awæȝ awat ‘went away’
awiten (pret) (128.19): aweȝ awit ‘went away (figurative) = perish’
bicomen (subj) (110.32): bicumen ‘go’
charen (pres) (132.17): cerræð ‘turn (to sth/sb)’
charen (inf) (44.1, 48.22, 24.30): cerræn, cyrræn, cyrren ‘to turn’
comen (pret) (132.4, 132.4 (2), 132.5): com, comen ‘went’
faren (pres) (6.12, 10.16, 14.1, 20.5, 20.15, 26.17, 102.12, 126.27): fareð, færð, faræð, faræþ, fare ‘goes’
faren (pret) (58.20): ȝeond land færde ‘went through the land’
faren (pret) (2.8, 12.31, 16.33 (2), 22.13, 28.3): ferde ‘went’
faren (inf) (18.1, 26.22, 76.20): faren, faran ‘to go’
faren (subj) (2.19, 8.4, 16.4, 38.16): fare ‘go’
faren (ger) (54.24): farende ‘going’
faren (to inf) (26.29): to farenne ‘to go’
forthgon (inf) (26.6): forðgan ‘to go forth’
forthsteppen (pres) (100.16): forþstepð ‘proceedeth’
forthwiten (pret) (116.32): forðiwitene ‘have gone away’
gon (pret) (60.1, 60.9, 66.31): eode ‘went’
gon (pres) (84.2, 84.8, 84.15): gæð ‘walk, go’
gon (inf) (58.32, 60.8, 84.15, 84.30, 140.4): gan ‘to go’
iwenden (subj) (86.19): gewende ‘return’
iwiten (imp) (68.20, 126.13): gewitæð ‘depart’
iwiten (pret) (120.31): iwiten ‘went’
overglidan (pret) (66.32): oferglad ‘went over’
sithen (inf) (6.28): siðian ‘to go’
sithen (pret) (24.19): siðode ‘went’
sithen (pres) (126.28): siþiæð ‘go’
steppen (pret) (82.1): stop ‘went’
throughfaren (pres) (46.28): þurhfærð ‘pass through’
throughfaren (inf) (46.12): þurhfaran ‘to pass through’
tofaren (pres) (124.4): tofaræð ‘goes’
wenden (pp) (86.1): iwende ‘(be) changed’
wenden (pres) (124.19): wendæþ ‘return’
wenden (pret) (16.24, 18.5, 22.20, 72.13): wende ‘turned away, went, turned, returned’
wenden (subj) (132.29): wende ‘turn’
wenden (inf) (132.29): wenden ‘to turn’
wharven (pp) (112.10): ihwærfod ‘be changed’
yondfaren (pres) (48.12, 88.24): þeondfærð, þeondfaræð ‘traverses, goes through’

(3) The Vices and Virtues
biwenden (imp) (101.21): bewænt ‘turn’
bouen (pres) (19.18): buȝeð ‘turn’
bouen (inf) (65.13): buȝen ‘to turn’
comen (imp) (113.27): cume ‘go’
comen (pres) (9.3): cumeð, cumen ‘go’
faren (pres) (5.27, 15.2, 17.29, 27.10, 35.5, 45.7 (2), 55.31, 57.11, 61.22, 73.20, 79.13, 89.23, 103.21, 127.5): farð, fare, fareð, faren, farð ‘go’
faren (subj) (23.22, 137.40): fare ‘go’
forleten (inf) (23.23): forlaten ‘let go’
gon (pret) (69.3, 83.11, 85.16, 121.5): ȝiede ‘went’
gon (pres) (89.3, 85.3, 89.18, 127.4, 139.17, 139.19): gað, go, goest ‘go, goes’
gon (inf) (143.23): go, to gonne ‘to go’
igon (pp) (121.25): ȝegan ‘gone’
skillen (pres) (57.10): scelie ‘departest’
skillen (inf) (17.25): skelien ‘to go away’
stein (pret) (143.11): steih ‘went up’
utfaren (subj) (73.24): ut-faren ‘go out’
utgon (pret) (119.22): utȝiede ‘went out’
wenden (pret) (19.14, 23.12, 23.16, 27.20145.1): iwant, wante, wante, wanten, ‘went, turned’
wenden (imp) (13.18, 19.14, 59.30, 81.5, 89.22 (2), 147.25): wænd, wændeð, wand, want, wanded ‘go, turn’
wenden (inf) (29.14, 31.12, 47.2, 83.29, 99.20, 145.5): wænden, wenden ‘to turn, to go’
wenden (pres.part) (71.23): vædinde ‘turning (to the world)’
wenden (pres) (33.17, 53.7, 65.15, 145.5, 127.30): wand, want ‘turn, turneth, turns’
wtien (imp) (19.32): witeð ‘go’
From the list above, we can observe the following:

1. In the *History of Holy Rood-tree*, there are no significant differences between the occurrences of the preterite of *gon* (i.e. *eode, eoden*) and that of *wenden*.
2. *Faren* appears as frequent as *gon* and *wenden* in *Holy Rood-tree*.
3. In the *Twelfth-Century Homilies*, varieties of verbs of motion denoting ‘to go’ increase, but the frequency of *wenden* is still high.
4. In the *Vices* and *Virtues*, *ȝiede* occurs four times.
5. In the *Vices* and *Virtues*, *faren* is not used in the past tense.
6. In the *Vices* and *Virtues*, *wenden* occurs more frequently than *gon*.
7. *Wenden* as ‘going, moving’ seems to be established in three texts.

4. Conclusion

In the preceding argument, we have traced the semantic shift of *wend*, and explore its distribution in the text during the transition period. We may conclude as follows: 1) *Wend* began to lose the connotation of ‘turning’ or ‘returning’ by the end of the Old English period. 2) *Wend* came to mean ‘to go’ irrespective of mode of progression, and at the same time, its frequency increased.

Needless to say, there remains much vestige of Old English in the transition period, and we should not conclude in haste. However, it is likely that Modern English *went* comes to the fore in the very early stage of Middle English.

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5. *OED, go, v. It also describes in the entry of wend as follows: "The original forms of the pa. tense and pple. [of wendan] are respectively wende and wended, wend, but the forms wente, went appear beside these from c1200, and latterly become the more usual: in the refl. and intr. senses went finally replaced the older preterits belonging to go, and from c1500 is most naturally regarded as the pa. tense of that verb, while wend was provided the new form wended."
10. F. Holthausen (1888; rpt. 1967) *Vices and Virtues. EETS OS 89.*

12. A. S. Napier (1894), ix.


17. Skeat (1879-1882), wend.

18. *British National Corpus*, http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/


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