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The merger of OE *þyncan* and *þencan*

Michiko Ogura

Chiba University

ABSTRACT

The development of Modern English *think* is often explained by the morphological merger of the two verbs *þencan* 'to think' and *þyncan* 'to seem' in early Middle English. This paper exemplifies that it is not the confusion between personal construction of *þencan* and 'impersonal' constructions of *þyncan* but the loss of contrast between < -e- > and < -i- > in the Northern dialect and other dialects, which leads to the merger of the two verbs that occurred with the present forms *þence* and *þince*, as well as the merger between < -u- > and < -ou- > in the preterite forms *þohte* and *þuhte*.

Keywords: Old English, Middle English, 'impersonal' constructions, merger.

1. Introduction

In the history of English, the Old English period is featured by 'impersonal' verbs.[1] We should rather use the expression "verbs used 'impersonally'" instead of "'impersonal' verbs", since these verbs often have the nominative of thing and a few examples of the nominative of person.

Gaaf (1904) starts his investigation of *þinken* (p. 77) by quoting from Sweet's *New English Grammar* § 1340, which I re-quote here as an important remark for further discussion: (Abbreviations and punctuations follow the quotation.)

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[1] I use 'impersonal' (with single quotes) for the construction with the dative of person like *him þyncþ* 'it seems to him' in contrast to that without the dative of person like *hit rinde* 'it rained'. See Ogura (1986: 13).

In O.E. there were two weak verbs of allied form and meaning: *þencan*, *þohte* 'think'; *þyncan*, *þuhte* 'seem', which was impersonal, *me þincþ* 'it seems to me' having much the same meaning as *ic þence*. In M.E. *þencan* became regularly *þenchen* in South-Thames English, *þenken* in North-Thames English; and *þyncan* became *þünchen*, *þinchen* in South-Thames English, *þinken* in North-Thames English. The pret. *þuhte* was soon disused, *þo(u)hte* taking its place; he *þohte* 'he thought', him *þohte* 'it seemed to him'. In Standard M.E. the two verbs were still kept apart in the infin. and present tenses, which had the Midland forms *þenken*, *i þenke*; *þinken*, *me þinkeþ*, etc.; but in the compound *beþinken* 'consider' = O.E. *beþencan*, the latter had already begun to encroach. In Northern E. *þink* completely supplanted *þenk*, as in Mn.E. Hence Mn.E. *think* is historically = O.E. *þyncan*, and its pret. *thought* = O.E. *þohte*, the pret. of the lost *þencan*'. (*New Eng. Gram.* § 1340).

The first point I cannot accept is the quick disuse of *þuhte* and its replacement by *þo(u)hte*. Owing to the Norman French spelling, both preterite forms could have been spelled *þo(u)hte* and the vowel in the stressed syllable could be pronounced [-u-]. [-ʊ-] or [-o-]. The second point is that the syntactic merger might have been accompanied by the morpho-phonological merger. What we should wonder now is how far the present forms *þinc-* and *þenc-* have been mingled without obvious syntactic and semantic difficulty. The aim of this study is to re-examine the examples discussed in previous studies and try to show a clearer process of the merger of *þyncan* and *þencan*.

2. Examples to be re-examined

Gaaf (1904: § 85) mentions "two possibilities" of the phonetic fusion of the two verbs, i.e. "*a. þyncan* might be assimilated to *þencan*, or *b.* the opposite might take place", and seeks Kentish examples. He quotes "[t]he only O.E. instance" from the *Blickling Homilies*, which is a personal construction, i.e.

(1)   BlHom 59.11 (HomS 17 (BlHom 5) 76)[2]

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[2]   I use *DOE* data with abbreviated titles to update the texts, page, and line numbers. The boldface is mine and is meant to emphasise a word, a phrase or a sentence. Translations are given for Old English and Middle English texts before 1400.

   & eal se lichoma geúnlustaþ þa geogoðlustas to fremmenne þa þe he ær hátheortlice lufode, & hi*m* swete wæron to aræfnenne. **Hie him þonne eft swiþe bitere þencaþ**, æfter þon þe se deað him tocymeþ Godes dóm to abeodenne.

   'And the whole body loatheth to perform those youthful lusts that he aforetime so earnestly loved, and which were sweet to him to perform. Then, again, they shall appear very bitter to him, after that death shall come to him to announce God's judgment.'

           (translation by Morris)

In the *Kentish Sermons* he finds an example of the verb in an 'impersonal' construction. Although it is included in *O.E. Misc.* (EETS, o.s. 49), it is from Laud MS 471, that is, in the latter half of the thirteenth century.[3]

(2) Old Kentish Sermons (Laud MS 471) 35.2
   bote yef ha luuie god almichti. and him seruiꝼ al **hit him may þenche** for-lore and idelnesse.

   'unless they love God Almighty and serve him, it may seem to him entirely forlorn and in vain'

An earlier example can be added by quoting *OED3* (†**think**, *v.¹*).

(3) a1225 (? c1175) Poema Morale (Lamb) 62 (*OED3*, line 62 only)
   Þo þe mest doð nu to gode. *and* þe lest to laðe.
   Eiðer to lutel *and* to muchel scal **þu*n*chen** eft hom baþe.

   'Those[4] who do most now for good and least for evil,
   Either too little or too much shall both seem to them afterwards.'

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[3] I use Laing (1993) concerning the dates of early Middle English manuscripts and Ker (1957, 1977) for those of Old English manuscripts.

[4] EETS translation has "He who", but the forms are *Þo þe* 'those who' in the plural. Cf. (Trin) *Se þe*.

Cf. [a1225 *Digby* þenchen, a1225 *Egerton* ðinche] (by *OED3*)

Also cf. (Trin) Se þe mast doð nu to gode and se last to lothe.
Eiðer to litel and to muchel hem sal þunche boðe.

Gaaf finds that the possibility *a*. "was not restricted to Kent", and he enumerates Middle English examples from various texts, sometimes with page and line numbers and sometimes just numbers of occurrences. Here are two examples from *Vices & Virtues* (*a*1225 (*c*1200)) quoted in his § 86. They are personal and 'personal.'

(4)   Vices & V. 9.29
        Đu me þen(c)st wel to wreiȝen to-fore gode for ðessere senne;

        'You think well to accuse me before God for this sin.'

(5)   Vices & V. 29.34
        Đies ilke haliȝe mihte, ðar ðe hie cumeð and bieð mid ðe manne, hie makeð him unwurð
        alle ðo faire þinges ðe on ðare swikele woreld faire þencheð;

        'This same holy virtue, where it comes and is with men, makes worthless to him all the fair things which in the deceptive world seem fair.'

Two manuscripts of Laȝamon's *Brut* (Cotton Caligula A. ix and Cotton Otho. C. xiii) give evidence for spelling variants. Examples from Gaaf (§ 86) are (6) with the nominative of thing[5] and (7) 'impersonal.'

(6)   Laȝ 15856[6]
        C. þa tiðende me þuncheð game.
        O. þe tydinge me þencheð game.

        'the tiding seems to me sport'

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5   I name this construction 'personal' (see Ogura (1986: 16)).
6   Modern English translations for Laȝ are from Madden (1847).

(7)   Laȝ 26028
        C. sellic þah hit þunche.
        O. wonder þeh hit þenche.

        'wonderous though it may seem'

I add two more: (8) 'impersonal' and (9) personal.

(8)   Laȝ 8261⁷
        C. And al hit **þuncð** hi*m* wel idon.
        O. And al hit **þincheþ** him wel i don.

        'and all it seems to him well done'

(9)   Laȝ 8555
        C. ich … and **þench** mid wulche deden. þu miht werien þine leoden.
        O. ich … and **þinche** mid woche dede. þou miht witie þine leode.

        'and (I) think with what deeds you can defend your people'

Gaaf writes that he has found at least two examples in Shoreham's Poems (*c*1350 (*a*1333)) without mentioning the details. I give three examples which can be considered appropriate for the discussion. Concerning example (12), we should not think that the form *þouȝte* is for a personal construction and *þoȝte* for an 'impersonal' construction, because we find *hym þouȝte* in VII (109) 649.

(10)   Shoreham IV (46) 181
        He þat ne **þynkeþ** nauȝt bote wel,
        And spekeþ and doþ al ryȝt,

(11)   Shoreham VII (8) 47
        Wat, hou fareþ hy þat hy nasynkeþ,
        Ase here kende were, hyt **þynkeþ**;⁸
        Ho halt ys op?

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7   This example is classified under *þenchen* 'to think', but the context is obviously 'impersonal.'
8   The footnote says: "*þynkeþ* in MS. (Wright *þenkeþ*)."

(12)   Shoreham VII (129) 769, 773
        Ryʒt al-so, þo he gyle **þouʒte**,
        For to brynge man to noʒte
        Pryuelyche,
        God almyʒty, þat hys wyl wyste,
        Aʒeyns hym **þoʒte** go by lyste
        Al so styllyche.

From *OED3* **†think** *v.¹*, I add three examples here. Example (15) shows *me thenk*, which may develop into *methink* as well as *methinks*.[9]

(13)   *c*1330 (? *a*1300) Arthour & Merlin (Arch.) 4974
        Me þenkeþ he makeþ long duelling.

(14)   *a*1393 Gower *CA* IV. 220
        So that **him thenketh** of a day
        A thousand yer, til he mai se
        The visage of Penolope

(15)   *a*1500 (? *a*1400) *Firumbras* 717
        Me thenk that thou canst wel
        To schastise the sarsins with thy swerd of stel.

According to his detailed investigation of the texts in each dialect, Gaaf says that "[a]lthough as regards the entire supplanting of *e* by *i* in *þenk* the Northern dialect was far ahead of the others, still the earliest beginnings of the confusion are found in Midland and Southern productions" (§ 90).

Gaaf sees "the *syntactical blending*" with the similarity of meaning which gave rise to "anomalous constructions" (§§ 105-106). He gives the following as a result: "Entire blending of the two verbs became unavoidable whenever a nominative + a form of the M.E. representative of O.E. *þencan* could no longer be distinguished from a dative + a form of the M.E. representative of O.E. *þyncan*. This was, for instance, the case in all dialects when this nom. or dat. was a noun or an indeclinable pronoun and the verb was in the preterite

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9   Gaaf, § 109. See also *OED3* **methinks**, v.

or accompanied by an auxiliary" (§ 107). In the next section, examples are given and discussed diachronically and stylistically.

3. Old English examples

Gaaf's investigation of Middle English dialects is praiseworthy, when we consider the fact that even in the twenty-first century the web corpus of the whole of Middle English dialects is not available. The *DOEC* makes a statistical survey possible, even though a semantic investigation must wait on the completion of the *DOE*. While waiting on that development, I have found several examples which may suggest the confusion or merger of *þyncan* and *þencan*.

3.1 Old English poems

I find three examples of *þyncan* in personal construction in Old English poetry, i.e.

(16)   Beo 368b
        Hy on wiggetawum   wyrðe **þinceað**
        eorla geæhtlan;

        They seem worthy of earls' esteem by (their) war-gears.'

(17)   ChristC 1424a
        Lytel **þuhte** ic leoda bearnum, læg ic on heardum stane,
        cildgeong on crybbe.

        'Little I seemed to the sons of men; I lay an infant in its bed on the hard rock.'

(18)   Res 35b
        þy þe hy him sylfum   sellan **þuhten**
        englas oferhydige   þonne ece Crist.

        'because they, the proud angels, considered themselves better than eternal Christ'

I also find two examples in the *Metres of Boethius*, one in 'impersonal' and the other in personal construction.[10]

(19)　Met10 66b
　　　Forðæm þe nane forlet,　þeah hit lang **ðince**,
　　　deað æfter dogorrime,　þonne he hæfð drihtnes leafe.

　　　'Because death leaves no one, though it may seem long, after a number of days, when it has the Lord's permission.'

(20)　Met15 15b
　　　Ðeah hine se dysega　do to cyninge,
　　　hu mæg þæt gesceadwis　scealc gereccan
　　　þæt he him ðy selra　sie oððe **þince**?

　　　'Though the foolish man should make him king, how can the intelligent man explain that he should be or seem the better for it?

3.2 Old English prose

In *Cura Pastolaris* (Hatton 20) I find three examples of *þyncan* in personal construction, one example in both 'impersonal' and personal 'reflexive' constructions, and one in Gregory's *Dialogues* (Hatton 76), which has a variant of *gesewen wesan* in Cotton Otho.C.i (vol.2).

(21)　CP 42.306.6
　　　Ne sculon ge no **ðyncan** eow selfum to wise.

　　　'You must not think yourselves too wise.'

(22)　CP 45.339.24
　　　hie sint to manigenne ðæt hie geðencen, ongemang ðæm ðe hie wilniað ðæt hie gifule **ðyncen**,

　　　'those are to be admonished to take care, while they wish to seem generous'

10　See Ogura (1986: 100).

(23)   CP 57.439.34
       & ðeah hi formicel god ne don, hi wilniað ðæt hi micel **ðyncen**, & hi
       mon widherge.

       and although they do not do too much good, they wished that they
       should be considered great and should be praised far and wide'

(24)   CP 17.113.10-12[11]
       Æresð him **ðuhte** selfum ðæt ðæt he wære suiðe unmedeme, ac siððan he
       understungen & awreðed wæs mid ðys hwilendlican onwalde, he **ðuhte** him
       selfum suiæe unlytel & suiðe medeme.

       'At first he himself thought that he was incompetent, but when he
       was supported by transitory authority, he considered himself far from
       despicable and quite competent.'

(25)   GD1(H) 10.77.5
       ac he wolde **beon ȝeþuht**, swylce he bet dyde þonne se bisceop 'but he
       wished to be thought, as he did better than the bishop'

       Cf. GD1(C) 10.77.7
       ac he wolde, þæt for mannum ȝesewen wære, þæt he betran lifes
       wære þonne se biscop

       'but he wished, as it seemed for men, that he were in better life than
       the bishop'

I also find two examples of 'personal' construction of *þyncan* and one example
of either 'personal' or personal (which can be a personification of the gems
on the priest's robe) in *CP*, and one example of 'impersonal' and 'personal'
constructions in prose *Boethius*. The co-occurrence of the construction of
indefinite *mon* or another 'impersonal' verb can be effective on the personal
use of *þyncan*.

(26)   CP 0.23.11
Ðara byrðenna hefignesse, eall ðæt ic his geman, ic awrite on ðisse
andweardan bec, ðylæs hi hwæm leohte **ðyncen** to underfonne;

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[11]   This example is quoted in Ogura (1986: 101) and Ogura (1989: 21).

'The heaviness of those burdens, all of which I remember, I will write in this present book, lest they seem easy for anyone to undertake.'

(27)   CP 34.235.24
       forðæm for ðæs æfstes scylde forweorðað ða godan weorc, ðeah ðe hie
       beforan monna eagum **ðyncen** trumlice gedon

       'because good works perish through the sin of envy, although in the
       eyes of men they seem strongly wrought'

(28)   CP 18.135.17
       Forðæm ðeah hie <woroldcundlice> drohtigen, hie wiliniað ðæt hie[12] **ðyncen**
       ða   betstan, ond ðeah hie gan on ðone ruman weg hiera agnes willan &
       lustfulnesse, hie wilniað ðæt hie mon hæbbe for ða betstan & ða halgestan.

       'Because, although they live in a worldly manner, they wish to be
       considered the best, and although they go on the wide road of their
       own will and desire, they wish to be considered the best and the
       holiest.'

(29)   Bo 39.127.26
       & me **þincð** þæt þu sadige hwæthwugununges, & þe **ðyncen** to ælenge
       þas langan spell, swelce þe nu lyste lioða

       'and it seems to me also that you are somewhat sated and this long
       argument seems to you too wearisome, as if you now wanted songs'
       (translation by Godden – Irvine)

3.3 Transitional period

I find two examples in *Ormulum* (*c*1175), personal and 'impersonal'
constructions side by side.

(30)   Orm 12436-12439
       He sahh him fasten mare inoh
              Þann aniʒ mann maʒʒ fasten,
       ⁊ **þohhte** þatt he wære Godd
              Þatt doþ all þatt him **þinnkeþþ**.

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[12]   Here *hie* can be priests (*ða sacerdas*) or the gems (*ða gimmas*) in the preceding sentence.

'He saw him fast enough, more than anyone can fast, and thought that he were God who does all that seems (good) to him.'

(31)   Orm 15667-15673
       Forr hemm itt **þinnkeþþ** scone,
Forrþi þatt teȝȝ ne **þennkenn** nohht
       Off heffness ærdess blisse,
⁊ forrþi **þinnkeþþ** hemm full god
       ⁊ luffsumm her to libbenn,
To follȝhenn þeȝȝre flæshess lust
       I maniȝ kinne sinne.

'For it seems shining to them, because they do not think of heaven's joy, and therefore it seems very good for them and pleasant here to live, to follow their carnal desire in many kinds of sin.'

When we consider 'personal' construction, i.e. with nominative of thing (or thought, etc.) + dative of person, together with 'impersonal' and personal (with nominative of person), we may confirm that OE *þyncan* had these three types of constructions from its appearance before its morpho-phonological merger with personal *þencan*.

4. The verb *seem*

When did the verb *seem* come into use? The earliest attestation appeared in *Orm* (*OED3*, **seem**, *v.*²) and the other in *Þe Wohunge of ure Lauerd*.[13] I add a few more.

(32)   Orm D66
       ⁊ te bitæche icc off þiss boc,
         Heh wikenn alls itt **semeþþ**,
       All to þurrhsekenn illc an ferrs,

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[13]   See Ogura (1986: 104). From *OED2* it was the second quotation.

'and I entrust you of this book as it seems noble duty to examine each verse wholly'

(33) *Þe Wohunge of ure Lauerd* 271
For he þurh þe þ*at* wisdom art al þis world wrahte *and* dihteð hit *and* dealeð as hit best **semeð**.

'for he through thee, that art wisdom, created all this world and ordereth it and divideth it, as it seemeth best'
<div align="right">(translation by Morris)</div>

(34) Ancr (Titus) 28/33
For ful of angoisse was tat ilke ned swat þ lihte of his licome aȝein þe angoisuse deað þ he schulde þolien þ **hit semde** read blod.

Cf. AW 60/8
for se ful of angosse wes þ ilke ned swat þ lihte of his licome aȝein þe angoisuse deað þ he schulde þolien¶ þ **hit þuhte** read blod.

'For so full of anguish was that violent sweat which poured from His body at the thought of the agonizing death He was to die, that it seemed like read blood.'
<div align="right">(translation by Salu)</div>

(35) St Marg (Bod 34) 20/24   (f. *MED* **sēmen** v. (2))
His grisliche teð **semden** of swart irn.

'His horrible teeth seemed of black iron.'

(36) Cursor 9111 ('impersonal')
C: Quar-thoru it **semes** wel wit þis
G: Quarthoru it **semed** wele bi þis

(37) Cursor 3311 ('personal')[14]

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[14] These three examples from *Cursor Mundi* are cited in *OED3*, **seem**, *v.²*; *can* and *dud* are both preterite auxiliary (i.e. *can seme* 'seemed'). See Ogura (2018: Chap. 7). *Cursor* 12445 is in a 'reflexive' construction, denoting 'to vouchsafe, deign' (*Obs*.).

  C: How all hir dedes can hir **seme**.
  T: how alle hir dedes dud hir **seme**

  Cf. Cursor12445
  C: For he þ*at* sent him vs a-mang To be born, he wald him **seme**,
  G: For he þ*at* sent hi*m* vs amang To be born, he wold him **seme**,

(38) Shoreham VII (92) 547
  Þe wyse man þe wiser **semeþ**
  Þer þet menye foules dremeþ,
   And no reysou*n*;

5. Conclusion

Through the re-examination of the examples found and discussed in previous studies, as well as the examples I found, my investigation has reached the following results.

1. Since 'impersonal' *þyncan* had 'personal' (with the nominative of thing) and personal (with the nominative of person) constructions as well as 'impersonal' one, what was seen in earlier English is a shift from 'impersonal' to personal in proportion and not a drastic change from one to the other.

2. It is not only a confusion of *þuhte* and *þohte*, which started the merger of the two verbs, but also the loss of contrast between *þinc-* and *þenc-* found in a limited number of extant contexts. Similarities of syntactic environments have supported the merger.

3. As Gaaf (1904) exemplified, most (not all) examples are found in Northern texts. But since the merger had already started in Old English, we should note that Northern texts were composed earlier but written later.

I have not included examples of *beþencan* and *geþencan* here in this investigation, but the semantic resemblance, i.e. 'to consider', could be one of the factors of the merger as well as morpho-phonological confusion.[15]

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[15] Though the 'reflexive' use of OE *beþencan* is usually found, there is no example of *beþencan* (*DOE*), *bethink* (*OED*) or *bithinken* (*MED*) in 'impersonal' constructions, and I have never found one in Ogura (1986), (1989) or later.

What we need is a philological enthusiasm to find possible examples, as Gaaf did in the early twentieth century, rather than the completion of a Middle English web corpus.16

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16 When dealing with 'impersonal' verbs and constructions, Old English manuscripts, even though scarce, must not be ignored, because 'impersonal' constructions did not start after, say, *c*1200. Semantic and syntactic analyses should not be separated completely. Synonyms and synonymous expressions include personal and 'impersonal' expressions at the same time; investigations about frequent or infrequent occurrences, changes or gradual shifts, native or loan words, should also be undertaken.

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Address: Michiko Ogura, Chiba University (Professor Emeritus), 5-39-20
Honcho, Koganei-shi, Tokyo 184-0004 Japan.
ORCID code: 0000-0002-0016-7527.