Verb order, object position and information status in Old English
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The correct analysis of the Old English (OE) object-verb/verb-object (OV/VO) alternation is a long-standing and highly-disputed issue in the diachronic syntax literature (see Taylor and van der Wurff 2005 for some recent views). The situation is complicated by the fact that in addition to the OV/VO variation, there is variation in the order of finite and non-finite verbs. Thus in clauses with a finite auxiliary, a non-finite main verb and an object, there are two seemingly independent alternations: VAux vs. AuxV order and OV vs. VO order, giving rise to four possible orders of the three elements Aux, V, and O: O V Aux, V Aux O, Aux O V, and Aux V O

Syntactically, the most parsimonious approach to analysing object position in OE is to disregard verb order and to derive all post-verbal objects in the same way, as has been proposed in, for instance, van Kemenade (1987), van der Wurff (1997), and Biberauer & Roberts (2005). This view makes the reasonable assumption that the two alternations are independent, and thus that verb order is not a factor in determining verb-object order. In analyses of this type, the source of the variation in object position is, rather, attributed to discourse /performance factors such as new information focus.

In this paper we show that this simple view is not supported by the evidence. When we widen our view of the OV/VO data beyond the mere existence of the alternates to include their distribution with respect to the discourse/performance factors – such as information status and end-weight – that are assumed to drive the alternation, we see a very different picture. There is clear evidence that the distribution of pre- vs. post-verbal objects differs systematically in VAux and AuxV clauses. Although this appears to support the non-independence of verb order and verb-object order, we argue instead that the two alternations are indeed syntactically independent, but that each alternation is associated with a change in progress: from head-final to head-initial TP (VAux to AuxV) and head-final to head-initial VP (OV to VO), respectively. Crucially, these two changes are linked in such a way as to create the appearance in the synchronic data of non-independence. We show that by adopting a model of syntactic change in which speakers have access to more than one grammar during the course of change, a conservative "outgoing" grammar and an innovative "incoming" grammar (Kroch 2003), we can account for the empirical facts, while maintaining syntactic independence of the headedness parameter settings in TP and VP.

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