Special issue on
Aspects of OV and VO order in the history of English

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Preface by the guest editors

Whether judged by the amount of intrinsic interest, the number of knock-on effects, or the sheer volume of scholarly work devoted to it, it seems safe to say that one of the major issues in English historical syntax is the shift from object–verb (OV) to verb–object (VO) order. Over the last three decades in particular, a large body of literature has grown up that has resulted in an increasingly detailed picture of this change. No doubt in part because the recent introduction of electronic corpora has provided a boost to data-oriented work, the popularity of this change shows no imminent signs of abating. Evidence for the continuing popularity of this topic was demonstrated at two conferences held at the University of Leiden Centre for Linguistics in 2003 (the second Holland–York Symposium on the History of English Syntax in April 2003, and the Conference on Comparative Diachronic Syntax in August 2003). Although neither of the meetings had the shift from OV to VO in English as a special theme, the conference programmes together included no fewer than eight papers on the topic. Seven of these can be found in this special issue, which aims to illuminate selected aspects of the alternation between OV and VO order in the history of English; the collection of articles is rounded off by a review of a recent monograph on the subject.

Together, the articles provide a good indication of the directions taken in current research on the change. One direction is leading to questions about the proper analysis of the quite spectacular range of OV and VO word-order options found in Old English, viewed against the background of their theoretical embedding, their historical development, and their crosslinguistic patterning. Thus, on the basis of a large collection of corpus data, Susan Pintzuk argues in her contribution that Old English must be viewed as a language allowing two underlying orders. Drawing on and extending her earlier work in this field, she presents a wide variety of empirical arguments that all lead to the conclusion that OV order should be viewed not as the result of movement of the object from postverbal position (whether alone or as part of a larger constituent) but as directly reflecting underlying order. In addition, Old English also shows signs (increasing in strength through time) of having VO as a possible underlying order.

A quite different conclusion is reached in the article by Theresa Biberauer and Ian Roberts, who argue for the more parsimonious analysis whereby Old English has only VO underlying order. To accommodate the various Old English word-order patterns, they propose that the language equally allows movement of the object or movement of a constituent containing the object – the latter possibility an instance of pied piping, instantiating a mechanism required in the grammar anyway. In early Middle English the pied-piping structures are reanalysed as instances of object movement (which is lost altogether at a later stage, as the result of a separate development). Pintzuk explicitly discusses this type of analysis and rejects it. Given the complexity of the empirical data and the theoretical considerations adduced to support the two different approaches, it is perhaps not surprising that there is as yet no agreement on this issue. In fact, Jan-Wouter Zwart's paper advocates yet another approach, whereby in Old English the object moves to the left individually (yielding OV order) but from Middle English onwards it moves as part of a pied-piped VP (yielding VO order). Zwart's initial aim is to demonstrate how a recent analysis of OV/VO differences between Modern English, on the one hand, and Modern Dutch and German, on the other, can be extended to the history of English. Yet he also shows that it may be possible to use a parameter-resetting account to subsume various other syntactic changes. Clearly, the approaches taken in these three contributions can be expected to stimulate much further research in this area.

Some of the empirical complexities that this research will have to take into account are described in the articles by Ann Taylor and Willem Koopman. Taylor finds that metrical texts written in the Old English period exhibit increasing frequencies of postverbal objects which are not separated from the verb by a (half-)line break. She relates this to the idea (also argued for in Pintzuk's paper) that later Old English saw the emergence of VO as an underlying order. She argues that whereas earlier instances of VO order are the result of object movement (signalled by the metrical break between verb and object) from underlying preverbal position, at least some of the later instances are due to base-generated VO order (where verb and object are part of the same phonological constituent). Other evidence bearing on the emergence of VO characteristics is presented by Koopman, who considers the frequency and distribution of postverbal particles and pronominal objects in Old English. He finds that these are not numerous, but attested frequently enough to speak of a real grammatical option, which becomes more and more common during the Old English period. Moreover, the examples appear to favour certain syntactic contexts: postverbal particles show a preference for accusative-plus-infinitive clauses while postverbal pronouns seem to feel most at home in coordinate clauses. This is a rather surprising pattern, which clearly calls for explanation in future analyses of the shift from OV to VO word order.

In past analyses of the shift, the erosion of the case system in the course of the early Middle English period has figured prominently as a cause. However, Thomas McFadden presents in his contribution several reasons why it is necessary to be sceptical of attempts to tie the OV–VO shift to the loss of overt case marking. He points out that there is already a noticeable increase in VO orders in the course of the Old English

period, when the case system is still fully functional; that the history of Dutch and German fails to support any simple link between the presence or absence of overt case and the occurrence of OV or VO word order; that the mainland Scandinavian languages have shown an apparent increase of leftward object movement while their case systems were declining; and that there is nothing in current theories about the interface between syntax and morphology that would predict that overt case marking should trigger object movement. For comparative purposes, McFadden discusses the case of verb movement, for which there are several plausible accounts linking it to the presence of overt inflectional morphology – but, as he notes, none of these carries over to the case of object movement. The implications are clear: any account of the OV–VO shift that posits a connection with the fate of the case system must be very explicit in its general assumptions and very responsive to crosslinguistic patterns in these areas.

Another recurrent theme in past work on the OV–VO shift has been that of language contact. This topic is addressed in Robert Cloutier's review of Carola Trips' recent book-length study of the shift. In that study, Trips puts forward the thesis that the shift is largely due to syntactic influence on English from Old Norse. However, after careful inspection of the data and arguments, Cloutier comes to the verdict 'not proven'. In presenting his case he draws attention to several non sequiturs in Trips' reasoning as well as finding fault with Trips' general approach. As Cloutier points out, Trips attempts to demonstrate Scandinavian influence with respect to the phenomena of object shift, scrambling, the verb-second constraint, and stylistic fronting, taking it for granted that such influence would automatically imply influence with respect to the order of object and verb as well. This, however, does not follow. Cloutier's message is therefore like McFadden's in import: if a case is to be made for language contact as a causative factor in the shift from OV to VO in English, the case had better be good.

The articles discussed so far all focus on the Old and Middle English periods, and this is indeed the time when it is generally thought the OV–VO shift played itself out. However, in their contribution to this issue, Mike Moerenhout and Wim van der Wurff draw attention to the continued occurrence of a modest amount of surface OV order in prose texts from the first half of the sixteenth century. Their data show that examples of this order are found predominantly in clauses which either have a (negatively) quantified object and an auxiliary or have a nonovert subject. They point out that this patterning replicates quite exactly (though at a slightly lower frequency) what is found in nonliterary texts from the fifteenth century, and suggest that it results not from any process affecting objects as such but from the processes of (negative) quantifier movement and topicalization to clause-initial position. Since a similar patterning of OV order is found in Norwegian before ca. 1900 and Icelandic up to today, clues to the reasons for its eventual loss in English may be found in a comparison of the grammars of the three languages at the relevant stages.

Although the articles in this special issue obviously do not solve all of the many questions still associated with the shift from OV to VO in English, they constitute representative examples of current work on the topic. As the articles make clear, the concerns addressed in such work focus on issues like the proper theoretical analysis of

the Old English word-order facts, the nature of the transition taking place in Middle English and/or early Modern English, the possible connections with concurrent or subsequent changes affecting other syntactic phenomena, the import of crosslinguistic comparative considerations, the precise nature of the empirical patterns of OV and VO in the various subperiods, and the causes of the entire development (whether these are sought in changes in case marking, language contact, or yet other factors). In our view this collection of articles succeeds in advancing our understanding of all these issues, and we hope that it will promote further research in this area.

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