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Fred West

Most of the statements concerning word order in Old and Middle English prose, no matter how close they come to accuracy, are based on impressions; relatively few statistical surveys have been made, and most of these have been devoted to single works or single authors. Hence, they make no positive statements on the changing incidence in word-order patterns.

In discussing the various descriptive statements that have been made about English prose, R. M. Wilson commented: "The syntax and the differences in word-order have hardly been touched at all. . . . It is essentially the structure of the individual sentence at the different periods that must be examined. . . . And although an analysis of word-order, or an investigation of some particular syntactic point, may seem dull and mechanical, at any rate the evidence so produced is much more susceptible of an unbiased assessment."[1]

An example of an impressionistic statement regarding word-order change appears in Quirk and Wrenn's excellent text entitled *An Old English Grammar*. The statement, "The prose and to a lesser extent the late verse display a considerable tendency towards the order SVO/C in non-dependent clauses,"[2] went unchallenged for ten years, when it drew a rebuttal from O. Funke, who objected primarily to the authors' lumping together OE prose and poetry, no matter how late.[3] Taking the statistical analysis of Aelfric's *Homilies* by Barrett[4] and his own similar analysis of *Maldon*, he showed a vast difference between late OE verse (*Maldon*, ca. 990) and prose of the same period. While *Homilies* showed 73 percent of the word-order patterns S-V and S-V-O, *Maldon* proved to follow the earlier Germanic word order: about 60 percent being in the verb-final patterns, and only 40 percent being of the S-V-O pattern. Thus, Quirk and Wrenn were correct in their statement regarding prose, but quite wrong regarding poetry.

Unfortunately, even a statistical study of considerable length can produce erroneous results, or at least give erroneous impressions. A. C. Baugh's textbook, *A History of the English Language*,[5] carries a footnote on page 189 stating that the change of English from a highly inflected to an extremely analytic language was complete by 1500. He cites as authority a statistical study by Charles C. Fries, "On the Development of the Structural Use of Word-Order in Modern English."[6] As a matter of fact, Fries's article indicates a much earlier date.

1/R. M. Wilson, "On the Continuity of English Prose," *Melanges de linguistique et de philologie: Fernand Mossé in memoriam* (Paris, 1959), pp. 486–94.
2/Randolph Quirk and C. L. Wrenn, *An Old English Grammar* (New York, 1957), p. 92.
3/O. Funke, "Some Remarks on Late O.E. Word-Order," *English Studies* 37 (June 1965): 99.
4/C. R. Barrett, *Studies in the Word-Order of Aelfric's Catholic Homilies and Lives of the Saints* (Cambridge, 1953).
5/A. C. Baugh, *A History of the English Language* (New York, 1957).
6/Charles C. Fries, "On the Development of the Structural Use of Word-Order in Modern English," *Language* 16 (1940): 199–208.

This paper is concerned with the impression, projected by Fries's article, that the modern word-order pattern of object-after-verb rather than the older Germanic pattern of object-before-verb came into dominance sometime between 1200 and 1300. Basing his figures upon several hundreds of samplings, Fries's statement includes the following table (table 1) to support his statement: "The change from the Old English free position of the accusative object (either before or after the verb) to the Modern English fixed position after the verb is indicated by the . . . figures" in table 1.

TABLE 1

PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN WORD-ORDER PATTERN

	Ca. 1000	Ca. 1200	Ca. 1300	Ca. 1400	Ca. 1500
Accusative object before verb ...	52.5	52.7	40+	14.3	1.87
Accusative object after verb ...	47.5	46.3	60−	85.7	98.13

True enough, Fries is concerned with loss of what he terms "taxemes of selection," which merely means inflection to determine case, and, more specifically, accusative and dative as objects. However, the basis of my argument is that incorrect conclusions are liable to be inferred from his presentation. For example, the above quotation preceding the table makes an unequivocal statement: that the modern V-O pattern does not become prevalent until 1200–1300. I shall attempt to show that this pattern became dominant much earlier. The rest of Fries's article will not be considered in this paper.

Following the behest of Wilson and the example of a few investigators ranging from Jesperson through Fries, Andrew, Barrett, and others,[7] I recently made a statistical analysis of several works in Old and Middle English to determine the word-order patterns of these works as representative of their periods.[8] The works under examination were *Beowulf*, *Parker Chronicle*, *Voyages of Ohthere and Wulfstan*, *Peterborough Chronicle*, *Ancrene Riwle*, *Science of Cirurgie*, and Mandeville's *Travels*. While the main purpose of the survey was to establish firmly that the cumulative sentence has always been the dominant sentence type from the earliest Old English writings, the tables compiled in this survey revealed several other characteristics and frequencies of word-order patterns. It is mainly from these tables that I draw my conclusions. Far from an exhaustive list, the works included do solidly represent various types of prose, such as narrative, expository, and homiletic. *Beowulf*, though poetry, was included as an extended, unified piece of earliest Old English writing.

7/See Otto Jespersen, *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, 9th ed. (New York, 1938), pp. 11–12; S. O. Andrew, *Syntax and Style in Old English* (New York, 1966); and Ann Shannon, *A Descriptive Syntax of the Parker Manuscript of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle from 734 to 891* ('s-Gravenhage, 1964), among others.

8/Fred West, "The Cumulative Sentence in Old and Middle English" (Ph.D. diss., University of Nevada, 1969).

Table 2 gives the word-order patterns and their incidence in each of the items. The figures in the columns represent frequency percentages of the indicated word-order patterns in the total sampling of that particular work. The apparatus for the study is reasonably simple and may be used in the structural analysis of other

TABLE 2

WORD-ORDER PATTERNS AND THEIR FREQUENCY PERCENTAGES

Word-Order Patterns	*Beowulf* Ca. 700	*Parker* 892–96	*Voyages* Ca. 890	*Peterborough* 1137	*Ancrene R.* Ca. 1220	*Cirurgie* Ca. 1380	*Travels* Ca. 1410
1. S-V-O	10.8	18.6	28.3	43.2	53.4	58.1	48.1
2. S-LV-C	7.7	8.6	13.3	8.1	20.5	9.7	7.4
3. V-S-O	3.1	24.3	21.6	10.8	8.2	14.5	1.2
4. O-V-S	4.6	1.4	5.0	2.7	2.7	3.2	18.5
5. O-S-V	15.4	2.9	3.3	5.4	1.4	1.6	6.2
6. S-O-V	12.3	1.4	1.7	5.4	2.7	...	...
7. S-V	10.8	7.1	...	8.1	...	4.8	3.7
8. Aux-S-V	1.5	1.4	...	2.7	1.4	...	...
9. S-V-O-Loc	1.5	1.4	...	2.7	...	...	2.5
10. LV-S-C	4.6	1.4	...	2.7	1.4	...	...
11. V-S	...	10.0	3.3	...	2.7	...	...
12. O-S-V-O	...	...	...	...	1.4	4.8	1.2
13. There/S-V-S	1.5	1.4	...	...	...	...	3.7
14. Aux-S-V-O	...	1.4	1.7	...	...	...	1.2
15. S-IO-O-V	3.1	1.4	...	...	...	...	...
16. V-O-S	...	1.4	3.3	...	...	...	...
17. Aux-S-O-V	3.1	5.7	...	...	...	...	...
18. O-S-V-Loc	...	...	...	2.7	1.4	...	...
19. Loc-S-V-O	...	1.4	...	...	...	...	1.2
20. S-Aux-O-V	...	4.3	1.7	...	...	...	...
21. S-V-IO-O	...	...	...	...	...	...	3.7
22. S-O-V-Loc	1.5	...	...	...	...	...	...
23. V-S-O-Loc	...	...	1.7	...	...	...	...
24. O-Aux-S-V	...	...	...	...	...	...	1.2
25. It/S-LV-C-S	...	...	...	...	...	1.6	...
26. C-It/S-LV-S	...	...	...	...	...	1.6	...
27. It/S-C-LV-S	...	...	...	...	1.4	...	...
28. S-It/O-V-O	...	...	...	...	1.4	...	...
29. S-Aux-IO-O-V	...	...	...	2.7	...	...	...
30. S-O-V-O	...	...	...	2.7	...	...	...
31. S-O-IO-V	...	1.4	...	...	...	...	...
32. C-LV-S	...	1.4	...	...	...	...	...
33. There/S-Aux-S-V	...	1.4	...	...	...	...	...
34. IO-S-V	3.1	...	...	...	...	...	...
35. IO-V-S	3.1	...	...	...	...	...	...
36. S-C-LV	3.1	...	...	...	...	...	...
37. S-IO-V-O-Loc	1.5	...	...	...	...	...	...
38. V-IO-O-S	1.5	...	...	...	...	...	...
39. Aux-S-C-LV	1.5	...	...	...	...	...	...
40. LV-It/S-C-S	1.5	...	...	...	...	...	...
41. LV-C-S	1.5	...	...	...	...	...	...
42. It/S-V-S-O	1.5	...	...	...	...	...	...
43. There/S-V-O-S	...	...	3.3	...	...	...	...
44. O-IO-V-S	...	...	1.7	...	...	...	...
45. V-IO-S-O	...	...	1.7	...	...	...	...
46. O-S-V-Aux	...	...	1.7	...	...	...	...
47. O-V-S-O	...	...	1.7	...	...	...	...
48. S-V-Loc-O-Loc	...	...	1.7	...	...	...	...
49. It/S-V-O-S	...	...	1.7	...	...	...	...
50. S-V-It/O-Loc-O-Loc	...	...	1.7	...	...	...	...
Total patterns	23	21	19	13	13	9	13

works toward building a comprehensive historical description of the English sentence. In Old and Middle English texts, punctuation is so inconsistent and arbitrary as to be virtually meaningless; so to obviate that problem in breaking out structures to be counted as sentences, Curme's term "proposition" was borrowed and applied to each independent subject-predicate statement. The proposition canceled out the concept of the compound sentence, leaving simple and complex structures, complex in the sense of having modifying clauses or phrases. Modifying elements are not considered in the patterns, but only basic elements, basic, that is, to the independent statement, or proposition.

Questions are omitted from the samplings.

The number of propositions included in the samplings was arrived at not by mathematical precision but by convenience. For instance, the *Beowulf* sampling consists of only 84 propositions, as contrasted with the 140 used in Mandeville. Cut off at line 183, at a shift in the narrative from the poet's preview of what had happened before to the impending arrival of Beowulf, the style suddenly shifts from narrative to homiletic, the "woe be to them" passage. The sampling is adequate to show relative frequencies of recurring patterns. Likewise, the sampling from *Peterborough Chronicle* falls below average—63 propositions—because that is the full entry in the *Chronicle* for the year 1137, an important entry following the generally acknowledged change from West Saxon literary prose to one of our earliest examples of Middle English. Yet it matches *Ancrene Riwle* (135 propositions) in number of basic word patterns.

Most of the symbols in the word-order patterns are obvious; however, some confusion might arise over the appearance of "Loc" (Locative). While the locative case vanished early from Old English, the sense of the locative as a restrictive element, integral to the meaning of the proposition, remained. Here we have to rely on intent at times to determine what carries the sense of the locative. The difference between a locative element and nonrestrictive phrase can be observed in the following: "7 þær abræcon an ȝeþorc inne on þæm fenne" and "sæton feaþa cirlisce men on" (*Parker Chronicle*, A.D. 892). The first sentence, "And there they stormed a fort inside the marsh," ends with an adverbial prepositional phrase which is not a locative element in the restrictive sense. The motion is toward "fort," not "inside the marsh." The second sentence, "Camped a few churlish men therein," does end in a locative element, the verb "camped" implying situation through motion, and "therein" being the object of that motion.

The locative was replaced by the dative and accusative, generally with prepositions, which fulfilled the function of completing the meaning of the verb. The head word in an "adverbial" phrase could be in the accusative case, as in:

aledon þa leofne þeoden,
beaga bryttan on bearm scipes
[*Beowulf*, lines 34–35]

Bearm is in the accusative case, the old adverbial accusative of goal after motion. Here it is plainly seen that "in the ship's bosom" is the goal after the motion, "They laid the beloved chief." So the phrase becomes an object of the verb, after "chief."

When these locative elements appear in a proposition in which no other object is present, they are classified "O" (object). But when both object and locative

appear in the same sentence, as in the example just cited, the locative is classified "Loc," in the same way that the "IO" (indirect object) is distinguished from the "O" (direct object).

Another element fulfilling the function of object is the object genitive, as in "And þonne rideð ælc hys weges" (*Voyages of Ohthere and Wulfstan*). With "weges" in the objective genitive, this word pattern falls under V-S-O.

Another point to be considered is the function of certain elements as indirect objects, elements which ordinarily might not be thought of in that category, but which do indeed fulfill the function. For example:

> Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum,
> monegum mægþum meodosetla ofteah,
> egsode eorlas, syððan ærest weard
> feasceaft funden. . . .
>
> [*Beowulf*, lines 4–7a]

The element "sceaþena þreatum" (from troops of enemies) performs the function of IO, being what Curme calls the old "sentence dative of interest";[9] that is, used with a transitive verb as an indirect object in connection with a direct object.

Curme's distinction has been used as far as possible in analyzing the anticipatory "it/there" element in this study.[10] Such a sentence as "Næs hit lengra fyrst" (*Beowulf*, line 134b) illustrates the anticipatory "it," pointing toward a following subject. Literally, "Nor was it longer time"; more regularly, "The time was not longer"; the literal structure falls under the classification LV-It/S-C-S.

Anticipatory "there" appears in this example from Mandeville's *Travels:* "Anothyr tyme ther cam a fayr yong man," which is classified as There/S-V-S. This particular word-order pattern does not figure in the O-V versus V-O discussion, however, because no object is included. In the total count from all the works surveyed, the "it/there" pattern including an object appears very few times, as can be seen in table 2.

The other symbols in table 2 seem clear enough.

While table 1 states unequivocally that V-O (as against O-V) did not become predominant until between 1200 and 1300, table 2 demonstrates that the shift in predominant word-order patterns actually occurred by A.D. 900. If the percentages are totaled for all the patterns in which the object comes after the verb, the figures for the first three items come out as follows:

Beowulf (ca. 700), 18.4; *Parker* (ca. 895), 47.1; *Voyages* (ca. 890), 61.7.

From post–A.D. 900, the trend is overwhelmingly toward the Modern English S-V-O pattern.

9/George O. Curme, *Syntax* (Boston, 1931), p. 103.

10/E. Kruisinga warns against confusing "provisional" (anticipatory) *it* with indefinite *it* ("Critical Contributions to English Syntax," *English Studies* 3 [1921]: 97); but Hendrik Poutsma argues that "a rigid discrimination between anticipatory *it* and indefinite *it* can hardly be sustained and is of little practical importance" (*A Grammar of Late Modern English* [Groningen, 1928], 1: 137). Curme, who discusses these elements in great detail, makes a practical distinction: "Differing from impersonal *it*, anticipatory *it* has a little concrete force, since it points to a definite subject" (p. 10).

While other inferences and conclusions can be drawn from table 2, the objective of this paper is only to demonstrate more accurately the shift in predominant word-order patterns and to date more precisely the change from O-V predominance to V-O.

Obviously, to present a complete history of the English sentence, quite a few more analyses of the type described above will be needed.

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