

The Loss of OV Orders in the History of English: A Re-Evaluation

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The syntactic nature of the Old English relative clause, where stylistic and discourse factors play a lesser role than in main clauses, perfectly fits the West-Germanic template: OV orders are the norm and VO is rare. The loss of OV is traditionally dated to the 1200s, with the bulk of accounts mainly relying either on the loss of morphological case (van Kemenade, 1987) or on the loss of verbal morphology (Roberts, 1997/2019; van der Wurff, 1997) to explain the demise of OV witnessed during Middle English. This paper presents a more updated picture of this transformation by means of an investigation of Early Middle English relative clauses. Our analysis reveals that traditional accounts reliant on a radical loss of OV around the 13th century present an incomplete picture, with underlying OV very much alive after the loss of case and verbal morphology: this makes a re-evaluation of the loss of OV in the history of English extremely necessary.

The nature of preposition stranding, whether pre-verbal or post-verbal, will be taken as a proxy for underlying word order: pre-verbal strandings will be taken as instances of underlying OV, whereas post-verbal strandings will be considered as evidencing the VO nature of the relative clause. The corpora used for the study are the *York-Toronto-Helsinki parsed corpus of Old English prose* (YCOE; Taylor et al., 2003) and the *Penn-Helsinki parsed corpus of Middle English* (PPCME2; Kroch & Taylor, 2000), works which have been available for several years, as well as *A Parsed Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English* (PLAEME, Truswell et al., 2018), a new parsed corpus which fills the well-known data gap of the PPCME2 for the critical 1250-1350 period.

Old English exhibits an overwhelming preference (98.5%) for OV orders in relatives, with VO a clear minority (1.5%). The Early Middle English period of 1150-1250 shows a roughly 50%-50% split between OV and VO. For the next century, PLAEME unexpectedly shows higher rates of OV: a 68%-to-32% preference for OV relative clauses, even though case and verbal inflection had already largely been lost. This unexpected high rate for OV orders in PLAEME cannot be explained by register (verse versus prose) or by a higher proportion of southern texts.

References

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