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Syntactic Change from Old into Middle English
with Special Reference to *Ancrene Wisse*

In the introduction to their *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, Bennett and Smithers make the point that:

> To distinguish and characterize the local varieties of English (spoken or written) is not the be-all and end-all of ME studies. It is more important to ascertain *the major structural characteristics* of the main varieties of ME, and to understand how and why these characteristics came into being (emphasis added, 1968, xxiii).

Since even by the ninth century Old English already alternated between SOV and SVO word order patterns (Bright 93), their point raises at least a couple of questions: (i) what counts as a major structural characteristic and (ii) how are these characteristics to be identified and differentiated from the earlier stages of the language? In this brief essay, I wish to address both of these questions in a tentative and exploratory way. In particular, I am interested in pursuing the slightly narrower question of how English, in moving from a primarily synthetic to a primarily analytic language, tolerated the loss of surface case-marking/morophological case.

To begin, take the well-known Old English narrative of the conflict between king Cynewulf and prince Cyneheard recorded in the 755 entry of the Parker manuscript of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Here a clear pattern of alternation between competing word orders may be observed (Bright 139-142):

(1) a.Her Cynewulf+NOM benam Sigebryht+ACC his rices+GEN

b....ond he þær wunade oþ þæt [hiene+ACC an swan+NOM ofstang æt Prifetes flodan]

c.Ond se Cynewulf+NOM oft miclum gefeohtum+INST feaht uuiþ Bretwalum

d.Ond [geascode he+NOM þone cyning+ACC lytle werode+INST on wifcyþþe on Merantune]$_1$ ond [hine+ACC þær berad]$_2$ ond [þone bur+ACC utan beeode]$_3$ ær [[þa men]$_i$ onfunden [þe mid þam kyninge+DAT wærun]$_i$]$_4$

The sentences displayed in (1) exhibit an interesting range of possible word orders. The S-V-O order of (1.a) indicates that, at this stage of Old English, configurationality has begun to play a role in determining grammatical relations. The bracketed clause of (1.b) at the same time indicates that reliance on configurationality is also operating at the level of sentence embedding since the conjunctive phrase *oþ þæt* is clearly occupying a complementizer position. Inside that embedded clause one can see that the S consituent in Old English is not necessarily always first, again indicating its mild hierarchy. In that clause the noun phrase in the ACC case appears first, yielding an O-S-V word order. In (1.c) this ACC-NOM (O-S) order is inverted, the O constituent going in the instrumental case. In (3.d) clause 1 shows a V-S-O order, while clause 2 shows an O-V order, its S constituent being null subject and under the coreference control of the subject of clause 1. Clause 3 also uses the same syntactic processes of control and O-V word order. Clause 4 is further evidence that the clause structure of Old English cannot be taken to be completely flat nor that it relies only on word order to define grammatical relations. In that clause, the relative clause indexed with its head noun prhase *þa men* requires that its

argument noun phrases be case-marked with DAT (= ACCOMPANIMENT) case and not NOM by the verb *wærun*.

Together, what these descriptive facts suggest is that for Old English, a single phrase structure rule operated. This

PS rule would allow any case-marked noun to appear first in the TOPIC position, independent of morphological case-marking, as well as accomodate the possibility of complementizer phrases to introduce clauses, whether embedded or not. This conclusion, of course, requires a great deal of testing, but at the very least it does suggest that surface case-marking in this variety of Old English is still functional.

Next, notice the following sentences from the 1137 entry of *The Peterborough Chronicle*:

(2) a. [þa þe King Stephne to Englalande com, þa macod he his gadering æt Oxeneford]₁ and þar [he nam þe biscop Roger of Sereberi, and Alexander Biscop of Lincol and te Canceler Roger, hise neves]₂ and [dide ælle in prisum]₃ [til hi iafen up here castles]₄
   b. [þa the suikes undergæton [ðat he milde man was and softe and god]ₐ and [na justise ne dide]ᵦ] [þa diden hi alle wunder]₁
   c. [Hi hadden him manred maked and athes suoren]₁ ac [hi nan threuthe ne heolden]₂
   d. [þa þe castles waren maked, þa fylden hi mid deovles and yvele men]₁
   e. [þa namem hi þa menᵢ [þeᵢ [hi wenden]ₐ [ðat ani god hefden]ᵦ]₁ (indices indicate co-reference)

First of all, one difference separating this stage of English with the stage represented in the Parker manuscript is the dramatic absence of surface case-marking. In his *Handbook of Middle English*, Fernand Mossé notes this fact at the same time that he states that the "syntax is still close to that of Old English (338). Clearly, there is an interesting tension between the fact that the richer case-system of the earlier stage of English is lost and the observation that the syntax remains proximate to that earlier stage. This tension rasies the question of how the syntax of these two stage of English can remain proximate even as the language is losing its morphological case

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system--its primary way of signallling grammatical relations and constituent word order. A brief description of these clauses reveals what resources the English language begins to rely upon in order to keep its surface structure maximally consistent in word order. For instance, one of these resources is the fact that the predicate phrase of the clause can be both clause initial and clause final, as the þa-þa clause of (2.a) so clearly attests to. The antecedent þa-clause has an S-V order (with the verb in the middle voice) and the consequent þa- clause shows V-S-O order, both of which are represented in the clauses of (1) above. Secondly, in (2.b) we see an S-V-O order with the object position filled by a complement clause. This amounts to a syntactic sign that this stage of English has solidifed a position for clausal complements adjacent to verbs of perception--or perhaps equivalently, that constituent hierarchy is becoming stronger than surface case-marking. Clauses A and B of (2.b) then are sister clauses governed by the verb undergæton. Notice also that clause B is an adoption of the Old French idiom, faire justise, and as such, and hence will require that the transfomation of NP movement be invoked. That is, as the object of dide, the noun-phrase justise has been fronted, which then gives an O-V order with a null subject controlled by the subject noun phrase of the antecedent a clause, the suikes. The syntax of (2.c) combines two word order patterns, the matrix clause being S-V-O and the subordinate clause being O-V. If this embedded clause contains something like an "accusative" subject, then the complete word order amounts to S-O-V pattern, a pattern repeated in clause 2. Next, looking at (2.d), one finds the use of the passive voice and consequently another instance of NP movement. As such, the antecedent a clause contains an S-V-X order, where X equals a non-phonetic category, a trace of the moved noun-phrase that takes on the function of S(ubject). Likewise, the consequent þa-clause contains a phonetically empty

grammatical slot, which semantically takes the noun-phrase
þe castles as its antecedent. On this description, the
consequent *þa*-clause has a V-S order with a null object in
surface structure. The superordinate clause of (2.e) shows a
V-S-O order, unlike the relative clause attached to the
object head noun, which has in its complex embedding, a S-V-
X order for the *wenden*-clause and a X-O-V for the *hefden*-
clause. In other words, in the former clause, X = a
complement clause, and in the latter, X = a non-phonetic
element, namely the trace of the relative pronoun *þe*. If
this is the case, then here we have another instance of
movement, a protoytpe of WH movement. The net effect of
these general syntactic processes is that they yield a
surface structure that mirrors the surface syntax of the
earlier stage of English, independent of the absence of
surface case-marking. It is tempting to say that at this
stage, Middle English has "tightened" its word order phrase
structure rule to a general S-V-O pattern, with
rearrangements of this pattern taking place by
transformation.

In this last set of examples, I look at some sentences
from *Ancrene Wisse*, a Middle English text belonging to the
Katherine-group--a manuscript family which, as Bennett and
Smithers argue, provides some of best evidence for the study
of Middle English dialects, by which they mean the study of
major structural characteristics and the conditions which
brought them about (xxiii). (The following clauses are
taken from the Corpus Christi College Cambridge 402
manuscript, edited by J.R.R. Tolkien):

(3) a. [Nu easki ye hwet riwle ye ancren schlen halden]₁ [ye
    schullen alles weis wið alle mihte ant strengðe wel
    witen þe inre and te uttre for hire sake]₂ (p. 7)

    b. [þeos riwle is imaket nawt of monnes fundles ah is of
    godes heaste] (p. 7)

c. [for þi ha is eauer ant an wið ute changunge] ant
[alle ahen hire in an eauer to halden] (p. 7).

d. al nis bute as þuften [to serui þe leafdi [to riwlin
þe heorte]](p. 11)

e. Nu mine leoue sustren [þis boc ich todeale on eahte
destinctiuns [þet ye cleopieð dalen]] (p. 11)

The first clause of (3.a) inverts the subject and predicate
to give a V-S-O order, with the O position being filled by a
complement clause. Inside this complement clause we find an
S-V-O order, with the object having undergone WH movement
into the complementizer position. This means that the
object position of *halden* is held down by the trace of the
noun phrase *hwet riwle*. In clause 2, an S-V-O order is
discernible if one posits a movement transformation that
takes the adverbial prepositional phrase and moves it into
the predicate verb phrase. In (3.b) alongside the use of a
passive construction, we also see the preservation of the
genitive surface case-marking--what Bennett and Smithers
call the adjectival use of the genitive case. The passive
syntax once again implies the existence of an empty category
in the derivation of this clause--that is, the noun phrase
þeos riwle would first appear as the underlying object of
the past participle *imaket* and then would access the subject
position in order to receive NOM case. What this analysis
implies is that at this stage, in its underlying structure,
Middle English resembles quite closely contemporary
varieties of English. (3.c) also shows the need to
postulate a movement transformation in the absence of
surface case-marking. Thus, in the conjoined clause
governed by *ahen*, the pronoun *hire* first appears as the
object of *to halden*. Further, if *to halden* is taken as an
infinitive clause, then the subject of the infinitive is
held down by the non-phonetic PRO(nominal) and is controlled

by the quantifier noun *alle*, the subject of *ahen*. On this account, the pronoun *hire* begins as the underlying object of the infinitive *to halden* and then via transformation "cliticizes" to the verb phrase. The lexical meaning of *ahen* supports this reading since this verb takes no direct object. In effect, (3.c) has a considerably more abstract underlying structure and derivation than the (Middle English) surface syntax reveals. Hence, in order to give a fuller picture of the grammatical processes that underlie the conjoined clause of (3.c), we may postulate something like (3.c)' as a possible underlying representation for (3.c):

(3.c)' [ant alle$_i$ ahen [PRO$_i$ to halden hire in an eauer]]

Application of the "clitic" movement transformations brings us closer to the Middle English surface syntax, as in (3.c)'':

(3.c)'' [ant alle$_i$ ahen [PRO$_i$ hire$_k$ to halden t$_k$ in an eauer]]

Thus, what we see in the surface syntax is an O-V order, the S constituent recoverable from the matrix clause via the coreferentiality between *alle*, subject of the main clause and the non-phonetic PRO, subject of the infinitive phrase. Seen in the light of the fact that Middle English is the stage at which the passive voice enters the language, one can see that both these movements are leftward and hence pattern together. The fact that the passive voice survives into modern times and something like cliticization does not is certainly an open question. At any rate, the O-V order effected by "cliticization" mirrors the earlier possible word order. Generalizing, it may be that syntactic movement was a way for this stage of Middle English to obey what Lightfoot calls the "transparency principle", which as

he states, "...requires derivations to be minimally complex
and initial, underlying structures to be "close" to their
respetive surface structures" (121). Furthermore, the
clause of (3.d) is likewise interesting for the way in which
it embeds--in a complex way--two infinitive clauses.
Positing once again a more abstract underlying syntax gives
a representation like the following:

(3.d)' [al nis bute puften_i [PRO_i to serui þe leafdi_k [PRO_k
        to riwlin þe heorte]]]

These clauses, embedded in the way they are, rely on a
hierchical structure, i.e. analytic relations. Thus, each
infinitive clause is adjacent to its respective governing
head noun, and the second embedded infinitive clauses
subjacent to the second. Each clause contains a non-
phonetic PRO subject, which is indexed with its respective
head noun. These control structures reflect a type of null
pronoun control that we saw in clauses like 2 and 3 of
(1.d). Clause (3.e) presents another case in which the
language at this stage is introducing a transformation that
has the effect of reflecting earlier word order
possibilities. Following the vocative address to his
audience, the author of *Ancrene Wisse* uses a transformation
that disrupts the S-V-O order of the clause. This
transformation takes the noun phrase *þis boc* from its direct
object position after the verb *todeale* and "topicalizes" it.
The resultant O-S-V, in its capacity to reflect in surface
syntax an earlier stage of "derivation", indicates just how
Middle English sought to keep its changes miminally complex-
-or perhaps minimally simple. One other point is worth
noting concerning (3.e) and that is that the relative clause
attached to the head noun *destinctiuns* seems to have a
pragmatic function of clarifying the use of the French
lexical item via its English synomym *dalen*. This type of

pragmatic function in which synonym pairs are used to clarify communication is common in language contact situations (See for instance Mühlhäusler, 1985).

To summarize, in this esay I have suggested that Middle English is making regular use of empty categories--structural non-phonetic gaps--in order to tolerate the loss of case. Perhaps it is in this sense that we can say that Old English, in reworking the configuational/analytic parameter of universal grammar, obeyed the transparency principle. In following through on the twin goals which Bennett and Smithers outline for the study of Middle English dialects--what we might think of as the major changes that the English language went through and the conditions for those changes-- it may be necessary to look for these changes on more local scales. *Ancrene Wisse* can play an important role in helping us understand some of these local processes because it represents a Middle English dialect that experience a great deal of contact with Anglo-Norman French. As such, the study of this Middle English text may help us give greater empirical content to the view that the historical event of the Norman Conquest accelarated the changes that were already taking place in Old English (Bolton 13).

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