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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/morphological 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 op þæt [hiene+ACC an swan+NOM ofstang æt Prifetes flodan]
c. Ond se Cynewulf+NOM oft miclum gefeohum+INST feaht uuip Bretwalum

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 op þæt is clearly occupying a complementizer position. Inside that embedded clause one can see that the S constituent 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 phrase 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 accommodate 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. [pa pe King Stephne to Englalande com, pa macod he his
gadering at Oxeneford]$_1$ and par [he nam pe bisco
Roger of Sereberi, and Alexander Bisco of Lincol and
te Canceler Roger, hise neves]$_2$ and [dide alle in
prism]$_3$ [til hi iafen up here castles]$_4$
b. [pa the suikes undergton [sat he milde man was and
softe and god]$_A$ and [na justise ne dide]$_B$ [pa diden
hi alle wunder]$_1$
c. [Hi hadden him manred maked and athes suoren]$_1$ ac [hi
nan theruthe ne heolden]$_2$
d. [pa pe castles waren maked, pa fylden hi mid deovles
and yvele men]$_1$
e. [pa namem hi pa meni [pei [hi wenden]$_A$ [sat ani god
hefden]$_B$]$_1$(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 raises the question of how the
syntax of these two stage of English can remain proximate
even as the language is losing its morphological case
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 pa-pa clause of (2.a) so clearly attests to. The antecedent pa-clause has an S-V order (with the verb in the middle voice) and the consequent pa-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 solidified 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 undergo. Notice also that clause B is an adoption of the Old French idiom, faire justice, and as such, and hence will require that the transformation of NP movement be invoked. That is, as the object of di, the noun-phrase justice 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(subject). Likewise, the consequent pa-clause contains a phonetically empty
grammatical slot, which semantically takes the noun-phrase *pe castles* as its antecedent. On this description, the consequent *pa*-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 *pe*. If this is the case, then here we have another instance of movement, a prototype 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 strengë wel witen *pe* inre and te uttre for hire sake]₂ (p. 7)

b. [*peos riwle is imaket nowt 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 leafdī [to riwlin þe heorte ]] (p. 11)

e. Nu mine leoue sustren [þis boc ich todeale on ehte destinctiuns [pet 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 alle₁ ahen [PRO₁ 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 alle₁ ahen [PRO₄ hire₄ to halden t₄ 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 respective 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 buite bufteni [PROi to serui be leafdiK [PROk to riwlin be heorte]]

These clauses, embedded in the way they are, rely on a hierarchical 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 pis 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 minimally 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 synonym 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 essay 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 configurational/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 accelerated the changes that were already taking place in Old English (Bolton 13).
Works Cited


