

Reconsidering the Status of Verb (Projection) Raising in Old English

Verb raising and verb projection raising (henceforth VR and VPR) are optional processes that permute the order of verbs and their complements and adjuncts in verb clusters in West Germanic head-final languages (see Wurmbrand to appear, among many others). Examples are given in (1) and (2) for VR in Dutch and VPR in West Flemish. As is standard, we use numbers to indicate scopal relations, with 1 having the highest scope, 3 the lowest.

(1) dat Jan het boek heeft gelezen (2) da Valère oa willen morgen no Gent goan
that Jan the book has-1 read-2 that Valère had-1 want-2 tomorrow to Gent go-3

As Wurmbrand and others have shown, the characteristics of VR and VPR vary along several dimensions, including language and dialect, speaker, and type of verb. For example, in clusters with two verbal elements, the possible variation in order, 1-2 vs. 2-1, is constrained by language and by finite verb type.

Similar permutations of verbs can also be found in Old English (OE). The aim of this paper is to reconsider the status of VR and VPR in OE on the basis of the York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose (Taylor et al 2003), a syntactically annotated corpus of 1.5 million words. We first provide a descriptive and quantitative overview of the different word order patterns involving a finite verb and one or two non-finite verbs in OE. We demonstrate that these patterns have many of the characteristics found in the modern West Germanic languages. First, there is variation by text, which certainly indicates variation by speaker and may indicate variation by dialect. Second, there is variation by verbal element, with auxiliary ‘have’ showing the lowest frequency of 1-2 orders. Third, the orders within OE verb clusters follow the patterns in other verb cluster languages. For example, in clusters with two verbal elements, OE permits both 1-2 and 2-1 order when the finite element is either a modal or auxiliary ‘be’ or ‘have’, like Dutch and some varieties of Swiss German but unlike the other West Germanic languages (Wurmbrand to appear).

These descriptive findings have important implications for an analysis of OE clausal structure and for a model of syntactic variation and change during the OE period, in the following way. Many OE clauses are ambiguous between head-initial structure with finite verb movement and head-final structure with VR or VPR. If VR and VPR are low frequency processes that are evenly distributed across contexts, their quantitative effect can be safely ignored when investigating the replacement of head-final structure by head-initial structure over the course of the OE period; this was the approach of Pintzuk 1999. However, we will demonstrate here that the frequency of VR and VPR is significantly higher than Pintzuk 1999 assumed (30% vs. 7%-12%), and therefore that the frequency of head-initial structure must be proportionately lower, with perhaps a different chronology to the competition between head-initial and head-final structure during the OE period.

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