

Old English subject-verb word order: An intertextual comparison

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The pragmatically oriented word order of Old English (OE) has much more flexibility than the word order of later periods. Scholarly attention has shifted from a purely syntactic study of OE word order to an assessment of what kinds of function or pragmatic motivation underly various word order patterns in OE (Hopper 1979; Bech 2001; Kemenade & Los 2006, to name a few). The role of verb-second word order has received particular attention (Los 2012; Cichosz 2018, among many others), as this is central to OE syntax, which can best be described as 'topic-first syntax' (Los 2012: 41). However, there are also other word order patterns in OE which are no less frequent and need further exploration.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate two types of subject-verb word order patterns in OE: SVX and XSV (verb-medial), as in (1) and (2) respectively. Both SVX and XSV have subject-verb order, which typically serves to provide backgrounding information that is often characterized by the imperfective aspect; these patterns are in contrast to verb-second word order, which has a foregrounding function characterized by the perfective aspect (Hopper 1979; Fleischman 1990).

- (1) **He** *wæs* ðære burge biscop Mediolana
'He was the bishop of the city of Mediolana [Milan]' (comart3,Mart_5_[Kotzor]:Ap5,A.2.520)
- (2) On ðæm dæge **God** *gereste* fram his weorce
'On that day God rested from his work' (comart3,Mart_5_[Kotzor]:Ma24,A.2.450)

The primary goal of this paper is to shed light on the neat division of labour between the SVX and XSV word order patterns, which share the backgrounding function in discourse, and approaches the analysis from a quantitative perspective. The paper will examine the two types of word order in terms of types of subject, the situation types of the verb and the types of clause elements. It will present data derived from selected texts in the *York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English* (Taylor et al. 2003); the data are collected from various texts, including narrative, exhortative and explanatory writings. The paper will show that the usage of SVX and XSV word order varied according to the type of texts. It will also compare the data with the existing studies of the verb-second word order (e.g. Bech 2014; Cichosz 2018). The paper will argue that XSV behaves differently from SVX mainly due to the clause-initial element, which in terms of information structure occupies the most important position in the clause.

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