Quantified and topicalised objects in 16th-century English

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In van der Wurff (1997) and Moerenhout and van der Wurff (2000), it is observed that late Middle English prose retains object-verb order as a productive option in contexts with an auxiliary and a quantified or negated object, and also in topicalisation structures. These can be viewed as late survivals of the more general process responsible for object-verb order in Old and early Middle English. However, a subject not yet well explored is the eventual disappearance of these late survivals. Van der Wurff and Foster (1997) investigated some 16th-century material and found that object-verb order was still a productive option in all kinds of syntactic contexts in poetry, but they did not examine enough prose to yield more than a handful of examples.

In order to determine more precisely when these limited types of object-verb order became impossible in prose, we have examined a larger collection of 16th-century prose texts. Our findings are that the patterns attested in 15th-century prose in fact continue until 1550, but then appear to dwindle away. We shall present some of the relevant data, discuss the reasons for their survival, provide an explanation for some differences at the level of detail between the 15th- and 16th-century data, signal a North-South split in the material, and offer some suggestions about the reasons for the apparent eventual loss of the structures in question.