OV/VO in Old (and Middle) English: Competing grammars vs. optional movement

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In this talk I compare two analyses for verb-object order in Old (and Middle) English: grammatical competition in the headedness of the VP (Kroch and Taylor 2000, Pintzuk 2002) vs. uniform head-initial structure with optional leftward scrambling (Nunes 2000, Roberts 1997, van der Wurff 1999). First, I discuss data from two Modern Germanic languages that have been analysed as VO with leftward scrambling – Yiddish (Diesing 1997) and Icelandic (Roegnvaldsson 1987, Svenonius 2000). Yiddish permits scrambling of all types of objects, including non-quantified (‘positive’) objects; but definite and indefinite positive objects are affected in different ways. In contrast, Icelandic permits scrambling of negative and quantified objects but not positive objects. Next, I compare Old English to Icelandic and Yiddish: I show that the distribution of negative and quantified objects in Old English is similar to (but not the same as) the Icelandic pattern, but that positive objects do not obey the Yiddish constraints. Next, I present data from Old and Middle English and show that in clauses with unambiguously head-initial structure, positive objects do not occur in preverbal position. The conclusion I draw from this distribution is that positive objects in preverbal position are merged there; in other words, preverbal positive objects are diagnostic of head-final structure, and Old English therefore exhibits competition in the structure of VPs, head-initial vs. head-final. Finally, I discuss the uniform head-initial analysis proposed by Nunes 2000 to account for these data, and show that it is stipulative and does not handle the full range of data.

Analysing OV/VO surface variation in Old and Middle English as derived from grammatical competition in the headedness of structure has implications for our understanding of the change from OV to VO: the loss of OV surface word order, at least for positive objects, must be analysed as the loss of head-final structure rather than the loss of scrambling.