Pronominal Objects in Old English Texts

Vladimir Bondar (Saint-Petersburg Institute for Linguistic Research)

It is often argued that pronominal objects in Old English were subject to thematic-rhematic organization of the text and thus rhematic objects which convey new information were put closer to the terminal position in a clause while thematic ones which state the given information could occupy any position [Kohonen 1978 : 145]. What I'm going to show is that this abstract statement cannot be consistently applied to the examples taken from the corpus of extant Old English texts. First of all, the notions "theme" and "rheme" are to be perceived not from the denotational meaning but from the relational point of view [Vallduví E., Engdahl E. 1996]. That helps to overcome the problem of themes being c-construable which implies that almost all pronouns will be thematic. Relational approach helps to single out contexts where pronouns appear to be rhematic and thus to trace the rule of their placement in accordance with the information packaging. But even this approach isn't sufficient enough to explain the positions of the pronouns in the texts of various genres and different periods of Old English. Many other factors played a crucial role in the position of pronominal objects or rather an interplay of these factors. Firstly, if a thematic object pronoun is a part of constructions like «*him to gewealde*», «*him to friðe*» etc then it tends to be placed closer to the end of a clause. Secondly, positioning seems to be rather different in various types of clauses and texts of various periods. Thus in main, simple and ac/and clauses the use of a pronoun object before and after the verb could convey different meaning depending on the pragmatics of the passage. This statement can be proved by comparing personal pronoun positions in subordinate clauses in homilies by Wulfstan and Aelfric. The placement of pronoun objects after the verb in subordinate clauses was triggered by the general change of Old English word order and can be explained in terms of structural complexity and weight of pronominal objects. The aim of the talk will be to exemplify and prove my second statement.

References

Kohonen 1978 – Kohonen V. On the Development of English Word Order in Religious Prose around 1000-1200. Abo, 1978.

Vallduví E., Engdahl E. The linguistic realization of information packaging // Linguistics. — 1996. 34 (3). — P. 459–519.