

Title The Double Object Construction: its absence and emergence in the history of English

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I claim that Old English had no Present-day English Double Object Construction (DOC) like (1); apparent DOC examples in OE are different from the PDE DOC. This absence of the DOC in OE makes an important suggestion about the clause structure of OE.

(1) John gave Mary a book.

Although, the treatment of the DOC varies among researchers (cf. Chomsky 1955/75, Barss and Lasnik 1986, Larson 1988, Aoun and Li 1989, Hornstein 1995), the following are widely accepted as typical features of the DOC:

(i) Direct Object NP and a predicate V must be adjacent.

(ii) Reflexive binding

(2) a. I showed Mary herself.

b.* I showed herself Mary (Larson 1988: 336)

(iii) Implication that the referent of the direct object (DO), i.e. *a book* in (1) actually reaches *Mary*; the indirect object (IO) must be the possessor of the direct object (Gropen et al. 1989).

Based on the above syntactic and semantic constraints, it follows that the NP1 (IO) asymmetrically c-commands the NP2 (DO). It can never be a flat structure like (3) (Oehrle 1976: 168), but a hierarchical structure something like (4):



Interestingly, the above features are not observed in the OE apparent counterpart. First, a variety of orders of two objects are possible: [V DO IO] [V IO DO] [IO V DO] [DO V IO] are all attested:

(5) hie tæcen sum gerad hiera geonglingum
they teach some wisdom.Accusative.DO their young men.Dative.IO

Second, OE lacked the reflexive binding like (2), and simple personal pronouns were used as anaphors. The meaning of the sentence “*He killed him*” was indeterminate whether *him* referred to the subject or not (Gelderen 2000). The third striking difference between the PDE DOC and OE apparent counterpart is that there is no semantic constraint like (iii) for the OE sentences:

(6) and him fela gifa bead ac he heora onfon nolde

“and offered him many gifts, but **he would not receive them**”

In (6) the direct object does not reach the indirect object *him*. Like this there are many OE examples where the indirect object does not receive the direct object.

Then, there is no syntactic and semantic evidence supporting the hierarchical structure like (4) in OE. Rather, the above facts suggest that the clause structure of OE is a flat structure like (3). This flat structure, although it may look strange, has some validity. Fischer and van der Leek (1983)

propose a partially flat structure for OE impersonal constructions. In this structure there is no privileged status of accusative NP arguments; accusative NPs, dative NPs and genitive NPs are all equal with the predicate verb (Osawa 1996; 2013). The flat structure can better accommodate the facts observed in earlier English like impersonal subjectless sentences and the split genitive NPs like (7) too:

(7) Ælfred-es sweostor cynning-es [N1.Genitive+N+ N2. Genitive]

‘King Alfred’s sister’ (AS.Chronicle Parker MS 82. 2. 888)

The DOC appeared in the 14th century because of the demise of case morphology (cf. Kemenade 1987, Allen 1995, Roberts 2007). This is when the reflexive binding was established due to the emergent DP.

Examples

(5) hie tæcen sum gerad hiera geonglingum =

they teach some wisdom.Accusative.DO their young men.Dative.IO

‘they teach some wisdom to their young men’

(Ælfric’s Grammar, M.M. MS. Harley 107. 13-14)

(6) and him fela gifa bead ac he heora onfon nolde

“and offered him many gifts, but he would not receive them”

(Ælfric’s Lives of Saints 31. 681. Skeat, W.W. (ed.) EETS.)

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