

## VERBAL POSITION IN OLD ENGLISH: EVIDENTIAL PROBLEMS

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The analysis of verbal position in OE has long been, and will no doubt continue to be a profound puzzle for historical linguists. The actual surface patterns that are found seem to allow a large amount of freedom of verb positioning. This is probably an important factor in the traditional analysis of Old English as having free word order. Yet the traditional analysis hardly does justice to the number of regularities that OE word order has, and there is a considerable body of literature about OE word order which analyses the patterns that occur in terms of stylistic, rhythmic and/or pragmatic variants. The challenge that OE word order poses to its analysts gained a new dimension with the advent of formal analyses. This is especially the case with generative analyses, as a generative analysis takes as its starting point that a language has one underlying word order, from which variants are derived by transformational rule. Van Kemenade (1987) has shown that we can get a long way towards achieving this aim for OE if we analyse OE as having SOV underlying order, with a rule of Verb Second that fronts the finite verb in root clauses; a rule of Extraposition cum Heavy NP-shift that moves nominal complements to the right of the base-generated verb; and a rule of Verb Raising that moves an infinitival verb or its projection to the right of a modal verb base-generated in sentence final position. A number of problems remain in this analysis, among others some unexpected frequency differences between the various patterns.

It is the aim of this article to discuss these problems, and to consider what are the crucial sorts of examples that constitute evidence for or against particular hypotheses. To see this, we will first, in section 1, summarize the analysis of verbal position of van Kemenade (1987). Next, in section 2, we shall discuss problems with this analysis noted by Pintzuk (1988) and Noteboom (1990), dealing with evidential problems and adducing crucial data as we go along. In section 3 a modified, though basically similar, version will be presented of the analysis in van Kemenade (1987), which takes into account the evidence as discussed, and some considerations concerning language change.

## 1. SOV underlying order

Van Kemenade (1987) (henceforth K) presents a government-binding analysis of OE word order, and argues crucially for an underlying order SOV. This order is reflected most frequently in surface patterns in embedded clauses. Some examples are given in 1)

- (1) a. *þæt ic þis boc of Ledenum gereorde to*  
that I this book from Latin language to  
*Engliscra spræce awende* (AHT<sub>h</sub>, I, preface, 1.6)  
English tongue translate  
'that I translate this book from the Latin language to the English tongue'  
b. ... *gif hie him þæs rices upon* (Parker, a755)  
if they him the kingdom granted  
'if they would grant him the kingdom'

From this basic order, K argues, surface patterns can be reasonably derived by transformational rule. The core feature of main clauses is that the finite verb (henceforth Vf) is in second constituent position. This position is derived by a rule of verb fronting from the underlying SOV order, resulting in patterns like 2)

- (2) a. *hwi wolde God swa lytles þinges him forwyrnan* (AHT<sub>h</sub>, I, 14)  
why would God so small thing him deny  
'why should God deny him such a small thing?'  
b. *for þæs wintres cyle nolde se asolcena erian* (AEHom, 17, 116)  
for the winter's cold not-wanted the layabout plough  
'the layabout didn't want to plough because of the cold'

This fronting of Vf applies only in main clauses. An interesting point in favour SOV basic order, is that usually fronting of Vf leaves behind the particle in verb-particle constructions<sup>1</sup>. Some core examples of this are given in 3).

- (3) a. *þa ahof Drihten hie up* (Blickling, p. 187)  
then raised lord them up  
'then the lord raised them up'  
b. *Aslat þa þa tunas ealle ymb þa burg onwaeg* (Bede, 202, 2)  
then the villages all around the city destroyed away  
'...and then destroyed all the villages around the city'

One might want to argue that fronting of Vf is not restricted to main clauses, witness the following examples:

<sup>1</sup> This is a simplification of the actual story. For further discussion, see van Kemenade (1987).

- (4) a. *þæt he mehte his feorh generian* (Dros, 48, 18)  
that he might his life save  
'so that he could save his life'  
b. *þæt hi mihton swa bealdlice Godes geleafan bodian* (AHT<sub>h</sub>, I, 232)  
that they might so boldly God's faith preach  
'that they could preach God's faith so boldly'

In these clauses, clearly embedded clauses, Vf is in the position immediately following the subject. There is one big difference however, between embedded clauses of this type and main clauses with V2: in embedded clauses the first position is always occupied by the subject, whereas in main clauses the first constituent can be a constituent other than the subject, as the examples in 2) testify. Moreover, in embedded clauses, Vf can also be in the third or fourth position (while the first position is still the subject):

- (5) a. *ðæt he Saul ne dorste ofslean* (CP, 199, 2)  
that he Saul not dared murder  
'that he did not dare to murder Saul'  
b. *þæt he þæs gewinnes mehte mare gefremman* (Oros, 47, 14)  
that he the victory could better achieve  
'so that he could achieve the victory all the better'  
c. *þæt he me ungederodne of ðisum weallendum hwere*  
that he me unharmed from this boiling cauldron  
*wylle nu ahreddan* (ASL, XIV, 111)  
wants now deliver  
'that he will deliver me now unhurt out of this boiling cauldron'

K analyses this as a rather free process of V-raising (henceforth VR), a phenomenon that is well-attested in all of the contemporary continental West-Germanic languages, see Den Besten and Edmondson (1983). A pattern like 5a) occurs in Modern Dutch; 5b) and 5c) in West-Flemish and Zurlituutsch, see Haegeman and van Riemsdijk (1986).

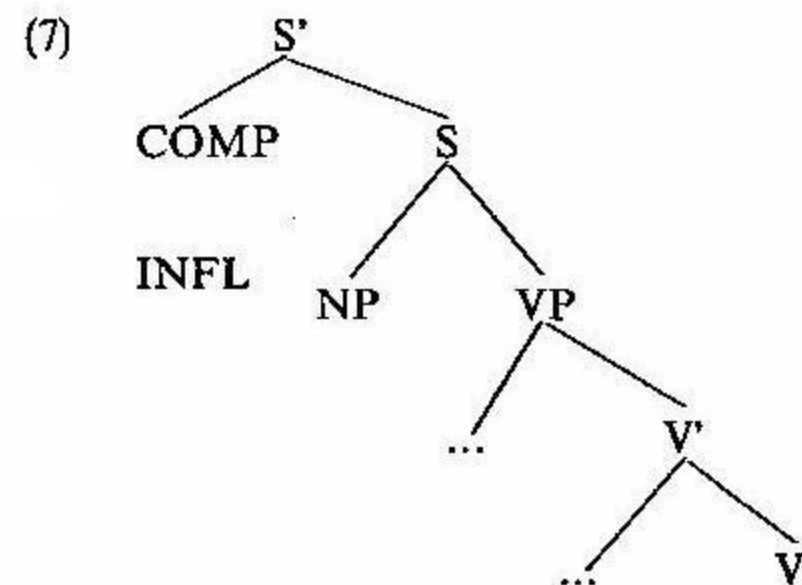
These observations should not be taken to suggest that VR occurs in embedded clauses only. Notice however, that in embedded clauses the evidence is clearest, as Vf is base-generated in final position there and is not fronted in the way that it is in main clauses.

The picture is complicated further by the fact that in both main and embedded clauses, all kinds of complements of the verb can appear to the right of the verb in sentence-final position:

- (6) a. *þa/nolde he eallunga gelyfan on his mode* (GD, 1, 5. 46.11)  
 then not-wanted he at all believe in his mind  
 'then he did not want to believe at all in his mind'
- b. *þaet he Gode nolde ðiowigan ða hwile ðe he meahte* (CP, 36, 279, 4)  
 that he God not-wanted serve the while that he could  
 'that he didn't want to serve God at the time when he could'
- c. ... *ðæet he ðurh ðæet meahte haelo onfon*  
 that he through that might salvation receive  
*ðurh Drihtnes gife* (Bede, 156, 24)  
 through God's gift  
 'that by that he might be salvaged through God's gift'
- d. *þaet hi ofer þaet ne dorston nohte gretan*  
 that they after that not dared not-at-all attack  
*þa halgan stowe* (GD, 4, 43, 4)  
 the holy place  
 'that they didn't dare at all attack the holy place after that'

In 6a), a main clause, the PP *on his mode* occurs on the right of the infinitival verb. 6b), 6c) and 6d) are embedded clauses with Verb Raising, where some constituent appears to the right of the verbal cluster. Notice again the discrepancy between the main clause 6a) and the embedded clauses 6b), 6c) and 6d): in the former, the first constituent is an adverbial *þa*, in the latter it is the subject.

To summarize, the basic order in OE is SOV; in main clauses there is a process of verb-fronting (to the left); in main and embedded clauses there is a process of VR (to the right) and a process of rightward movement of complements. K analyses this structurally as follows<sup>2</sup>

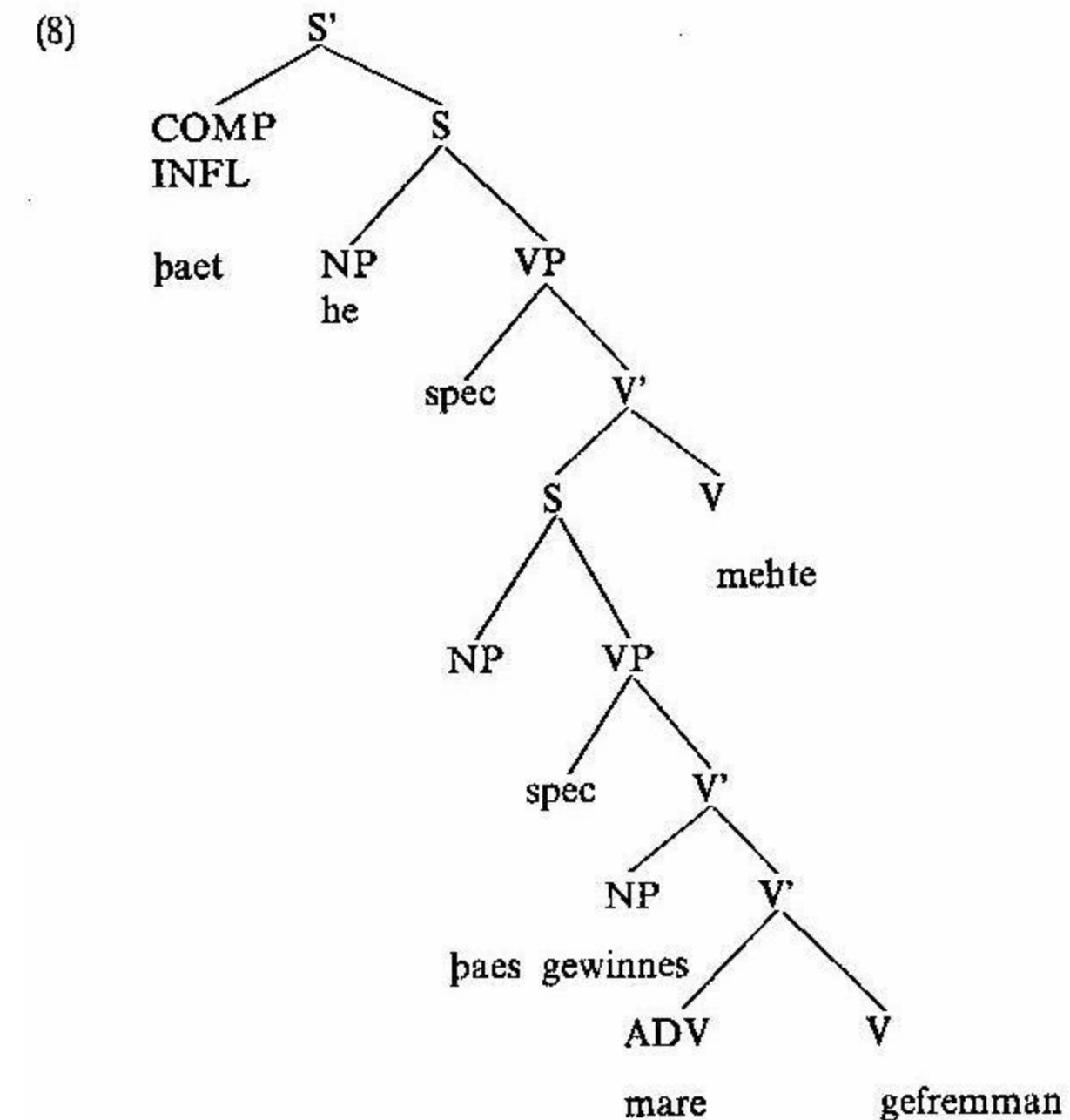


<sup>2</sup> We shall recast the structure 7) later on in the light of recent theoretical innovations.

In a structure like 7), a sentence S' consists of a complementiser position COMP and a proposition S. S consists of a NP (subject) and a Verb Phrase. As OE is SOV, the VP has the verb in final position.

Verb fronting in main clauses reflects a process of Verb Second (V2), a phenomenon well-attested in contemporary Germanic languages. Fronting of V<sub>f</sub> is to the COMP/INFL position when that COMP/INFL position is not lexically filled by a complementiser such as *that*. Presumably then, movement of V<sub>f</sub>' is triggered because the COMP/INFL position must be lexically filled<sup>3</sup>.

VR in embedded clauses is analysed as follows: VR is triggered among others by modal verbs. Modal verbs are predominantly main verbs in OE. This means that when it is followed by an infinitival verb, a modal selects an infinitival clausal complement. Thus K analyses a VR structure, say example 5b) as follows:<sup>4</sup>



<sup>3</sup> I leave out here the theoretical motivation for V-movement to COMP. For some analyses, see Koopman (1984), Weerman (1989).

<sup>4</sup> As with the analysis of V2, we will recast this structure later.

The modal main verb *mehte* triggers VR. VR is essentially a clause union phenomenon that destroys the clausal status of the S complement. The infinitival verb, or a projection of it, adjoins to the modal V *mehte* to form a verbal cluster. Thus in 8) the infinitival verb *gefremman* can form a cluster with *mehte*, resulting in [<sub>V</sub> V V]; or the V' *mare gefremman* can do so, resulting in [<sub>V</sub> V [<sub>V'</sub> ADV V]]; or the V' *peas gewinnes mare gefremman* can do so, resulting in [<sub>V</sub> V [<sub>V'</sub> NP [<sub>V'</sub> ADV V]]]. The second instance is attested in the example 5b), but the other options are in principle possible, as we shall see below in more detail.

The occurrence of all sorts of complements to the right of the VP-final verb is analysed by K as a process of rightward movement of complements to postverbal position.

In the next section, we will discuss some problems with aspects of this analysis.

## 2 Evaluation

Subsequent work has signalled some problems with the analysis summarised in the previous section, mainly with respect to the V2 story and the VR story. To see these, it is important to realise that K's analysis postulates a V2 process that occurs in main clauses only, and a VR process that occurs in both main and embedded clauses. The combination yields rather similar word orders in main and embedded clauses, though resulting from different processes. While not a priori impossible, or even unlikely, this is not the more straightforward hypothesis, cf. Allen (1990). It is therefore important to see what sort of evidence can be established for the various processes. We shall do this first for V2.

### 2.1 Verb Second

According to K, V2 is a process whereby Vf, base-generated in sentence final position, moves to the COMP/INFL position because that position must be lexically filled.<sup>5</sup> Usually, though not always, this is accompanied by topicalization of some constituent to first constituent position. Thus, the first constituent in V2 sentences is not necessarily the subject, but can also be an object, adverbial, PP etc. as in the examples 2).

<sup>5</sup> Given this, it is more appropriate to talk about root vs. non-root clauses rather than main and embedded clauses, because there exist main clauses with a base-generated complementiser (and no V to COMP), and embedded clauses without a base-generated complementiser (and with V to COMP).

Verb Second is not completely obligatory, contrary to what one might infer from K's analysis. Though they are not frequent, it is not difficult to find examples of root clauses where Vf is not fronted to second constituent position:

- (9) a. *Sisinnius swa-þeah se ungesaeliga dema*  
 Sisinnius nevertheless the unhappy judge  
*noelde on Crist gelyfan* (ASL, XXIX, 313)  
 not-wanted in Christ believe  
 'nevertheless Sisinnius, the unhappy judge, would not believe in Christ'
- b. *Ðaet folc þa þaes on merigen macodon hi gearwe* (ASL, XX, 223)  
 the people then the next morning made themselves ready  
 'then the next morning, the people made themselves ready'

Given the analysis of V2 as an obligatory root phenomenon, it is not entirely clear how such sentences should be diagnosed, except as 'failure of V2'. Weerman (1989) analyses the lexicalisation of COMP by Vf as a syntactic way of licensing COMP, vs. a morphological/inherent way. Sentences like 9) would then represent something like an 'older' stage in which (verbal) flexion is still rich enough to identify COMP inherently, much like inherent case on nouns. Interesting as this hypothesis may seem, there is no evidence for a correlation between the occurrence of sentences like 9) and the development of morphological flexion. We therefore leave this as a problem. This does not mean, however, that the analysis of V2 should be thrown away, and neither do sentences like 9) constitute any sort of problem for deriving OE word orders from one underlying order, as Allen (1990) would have it. The analysis of V2 is valid, only for some reason it does not work for all the examples. And sentences like 9) represent instances of SOV order, and are not in discord with K's analysis from that point of view.

The fact that V2 is not completely obligatory, presents us with a particular evidential problem. Given the hypothesis that OE is SOV underlyingly, with a rule of V2 moving Vf to the left in root clauses, and a rule of extraposition cum 'heavy NP shift' to the right of the base-generated verb, this leaves us with no clear evidence for V-movement in very many sentences. Let me illustrate this with an example: a simple OVS pattern in a root clause can be derived from SOV basic order in various ways: either by V2 fronting of V and topicalization of the object or by postposing the subject. This means that most sentences with a single verb cannot count as conclusive evidence for V2, and we have to look elsewhere for crucial evidence. We have to consider sentences with two verbs then, as they can tell us more as to how the position of Vf deviates from that of the infinitive or participle. But here we have to make a further

restriction: root sentences with two verbs starting with a subject do not constitute clear evidence for V2 movement to COMP either, as they could also represent instances of VR. The only conclusive sort of evidence are thus root clauses with two verbs, with the first position occupied by a topic or wh-word. In other words, sentences like 2), repeated here as 10)

- (10) a. *hwī wolde God swa lytles þinges him forwyrnan* (AHT<sub>h</sub>, I, 14)  
 why would God so small thing him deny  
 'why should God deny him such a small thing?'  
 b. *for þaes wintres cyle nolde se asolcena erian*  
 for the winter's cold not-wanted the layabout plough (AEHom, 17, 116)  
 'the layabout didn't want to plough because of the winter cold'

We take into consideration here only clauses with a nominal subject, as K has demonstrated that pronominal subjects behave in a different way<sup>6</sup>. A thorough look at examples of this sort shows that a topic as in 10) very solidly goes together with fronting of Vf, with very few exceptions. This observation is based on word order counts of sentences containing various modal verbs in Venezky and DiPaolo Healy (1980). This can be contrasted with non-root clauses: in non-root clauses topicalisation occurs very rarely; in the vast majority of non-root clauses, the subject is in first position. Where an embedded clause is introduced by a topic, the clause is embedded under a bridge verb such as a verb of saying. Let me illustrate this with an example:

- (11) *Gregorius se trahtnere cwæð þæt*  
 Gregory the interpreter said that  
*forði wolde drihten getrahtnian þurh*  
 therefore wanted God interpret through  
*hine sylfne þæt bigspel þe...* (AEHom II, 549 219)  
 himself the parable that...  
 'Gregory the interpreter said that therefore  
 God wanted to interpret through himself the  
 parable that...'

A verb of saying like *cwēpan* can be followed by a whole new illocution, including a new topic, followed by Vf etc. We see in the literature on V2 that this fact is familiar from other (present-day) V2 languages. The OE examples of

<sup>6</sup> K analyses personal pronouns as a particular type of syntactic clitic. I presuppose something like this analysis here, as detailed consideration of it would confuse the otherwise clear picture.

embedded topics that I know of, are all embedded under bridge verbs. Otherwise, non-root clauses almost always have the subject in first position.<sup>7</sup> We can see then, that by isolating the set of examples that are crucial as illustration of the V2 phenomenon, the analysis of OE as a V2 language stands.

## 2.2 V-raising

V-raising as formulated by K yields the following patterns in non-root clauses:

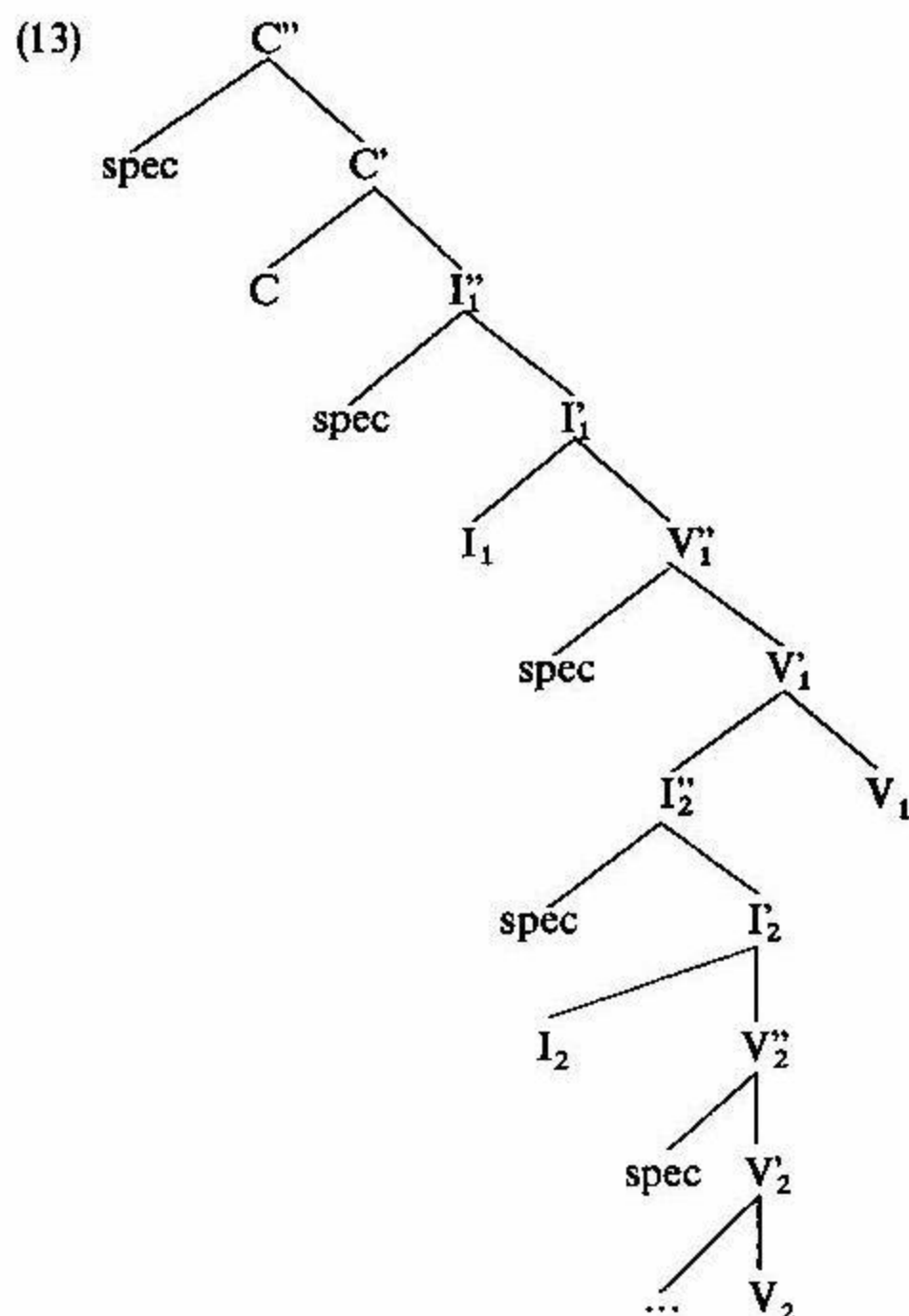
- (12) a. COMP – Subject – (XP) – (XP) – V – Vf – (XP)  
 b. COMP – Subject – (XP) – (XP) – Vf – V – (XP)  
 c. COMP – Subject – XP – (XP) – Vf – XP – V – (XP)  
 d. COMP – Subject – Vf – XP – (XP) – V – (XP)

XP stands for 'some constituent', mostly a complement of the infinitival verb. The bracketed XP's are optional. According to K, 12a) represents a VR pattern where the infinitival verb raises to the left of V (similar to Modern German); in 12b) the infinitival raises to the right of the modal (similar to Modern Dutch); in 12c) a V' projection of the infinitival V raises to right of the modal (similar to e.g. West Flemish); and the same applies in 12d). The Modern Germanic pendants of 12a) and 12b) are known as VR (VR), and those of 12c) and 12d) as V-projection raising (henceforth VPR). This analysis has been commented on by various scholars. W. Koopman (1990a) argues, among others, that in the pattern 12a), there is less evidence for VR than in the other patterns, and presumably he is right about that.<sup>8</sup> In Koopman (1990b) he presents evidence that the pattern in 12b) must be regarded as **optionally** a VR pattern. The notion that 12b) represents a VR pattern has so far rightly gone undisputed.

The validity of a VR analysis for 12c) and 12d) is questioned by Pintzuk (1988) and Noteboom (1990). They both assume the more articulate structure of Chomsky (1986) for OE:

<sup>7</sup> A notable exception to this observation are object pronouns that sometimes occur between complementiser and subject. K analyses these as object clitics.

<sup>8</sup> Koopman is concerned about deriving patterns with three verb forms in passive sentences, among others. The intricacies of these do not affect the basic story outlined here, so I will leave them aside.



In this structure, the COMP/INFL node assumed by K is split up into two separate projections C'' (C for COMP) and I'' (I for INFL) and represent roughly the older notions S' and S respectively. In terms of this structure V2 movement as discussed by K would involve movement of V first to I, and subsequent movement of V/I to C. Pintzuk argues that OE verb-particle constructions present evidence that in the pattern 12d) in non-root clauses (not involving movement to C) there is movement of V to I, so leftward movement of V, rather than VPR to the right. She does not, however, make a clear case for this, as the statistics she gives do not show that this analysis is better than a VPR analysis.<sup>9</sup> Noteboom (1990) assumes that an analysis in terms of VPR is unattractive (without clear arguments) and also suggests an analysis like Pintzuk's for the pattern 12d). The pattern 12c) is also analysed in terms of movement of V to I. The XP preceding Vf in 12c), she states, should be

<sup>9</sup> Pintzuk's (1988) results are based a limited corpus.

analysed as occupying an adverbial position on I. This analysis makes a very clear prediction about the nature of the constituent preceding Vf in non-root clauses: it is always an adverbial. This prediction is not borne out: the pattern 12c) occurs with some frequency in all the major OE texts, and in every text some instances can be found where the XP on the left of Vf is a subcategorised constituent. Some examples of this are given in 14). In 15) some examples are given with two constituents preceding Vf.

- (14) a. *ðæt he wisdom maege wið ofermetta aefre*  
 that he wisdom may with pride ever  
*gemengean* (Meters of Boethius 7, 7)  
 mingle  
 'that he may always combine pride with wisdom'
- b. *Daet waes ða ða he Judeas nolde nan wuht*  
 that was then when he Judas not-wanted nothing  
*laeran ...* (CP, 58.443.3)  
 instruct...  
 'that was when he didn't want to inform Judas of anything'
- c. ... *ðæt mon ðæt gewin nolde him betaecan* (Oros, 124,20)  
 that they the conflict not-wanted him entrust  
 'that they did not want to entrust the conflict to him'
- (15) a. *ðæt ic ðin soðfaest word gesund mote on ealle*  
 that I your true word sound must at all  
*tid elne healdan* (Metrical psalms of the Paris psalter 118, 20)  
 times entirely hold  
 'that must hold your true word entirely sound at all times'
- b. ... *Hwi heo ða geniðerunge, ðe heo ðonne*  
 why she the condemnation that she then  
*ðolað, nolde aer on life mid aenigre*  
 suffers, not-wanted before in life with any  
*carfulnessse foresceawian* (AHT, I, 408)  
 carefulness foresee  
 'why it would not before in life with any  
 carefulness foresee the condemnation which it then suffers'

14) presents clear examples of subcategorised constituents preceding Vf in a non-root clause. In 15a) two constituents precede Vf, and in 15b) an object with a relative clause modifying it, precedes Vf. These are only a few examples out of many more that could be quoted. Together, they make it clear that in the pattern 12c) the constituent preceding Vf in non-root clauses, is not an

adverbial position. This further validates the VPR analysis, as far as I can judge, at the very least for the pattern 12c). And presumably, if a VPR analysis is correct for 12c), it is also correct for 12d).

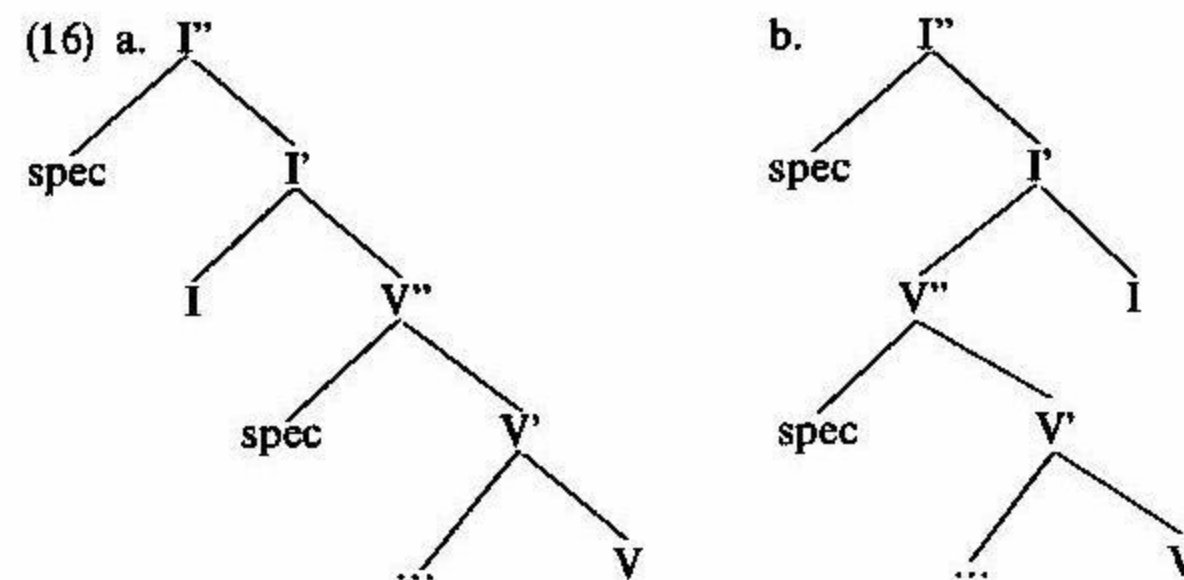
However, there is a remaining problem with the pattern 12d) for a VPR analysis for reasons that have not been put forward yet, and which might be an argument for Pintzuk's and Noteboom's analysis. The 'ordinary VR patterns' 12a) and 12b) occur quite frequently.<sup>10</sup> The crucial VPR pattern 12c) occurs infrequently. On the basis of this, one might expect that 12d) too would be infrequent, if 12c) and 12d) are to be analysed as variants of the VPR pattern. However, 12d) occurs very frequently! Indeed, in one of the major OE prose collections, Aelfric's homilies, it is by far the most frequent pattern in non-root clauses. There is no theoretical motivation for a spectacular difference in frequency between 12c) and 12d), if both are VPR patterns. 12c) provides the crucial motivation for a VPR analysis, and is infrequent. It is therefore unlikely that 12d) is to be analysed exclusively as a VPR pattern. The question what the right analysis for 12d) is, remains as yet open. And the answer to it cannot be straightforward: on the one hand we saw that there is good evidence for VPR in OE; on the other it seems unlikely that VPR is the right (or the only right) answer to one of the most frequent word order patterns, incidentally one of the core patterns that it is supposed to explain. In the next section, we shall suggest a solution to the problem, which in part makes use of Pintzuk's and Noteboom's insights.

### 3. A modified analysis

As a first step towards a solution, we begin by tentatively adopting the structure presupposed by Pintzuk (1988) and Noteboom (1990), subject to the considerations discussed below.

Observe first of all that K's V2 analysis can easily be fitted into this structure. Instead of V-movement to COMP/INFL in root clauses, we have V-movement first to I, and subsequent movement of V/I to C. How about V-raising? With respect to the analysis of the pattern 12d), both Pintzuk and Noteboom suggest that V1 moves to I1, instead of movement of V2 or a projection of it to the right of V1. Apart from the fact that this does not explain the occurrence of pattern 12c) in examples such as 14) and 15), there is a theoretical problem with this structure. According to standard assumptions I is base-generated adjacent to V, so that the appropriate finiteness information (subject-verb concord etc.) can reach the verb. This structure then provides a reasonable story why V must move to I: in order to receive finiteness features. However, there is a problem with respect to the pattern 12a) that has

Vf in final position (Subject – XP – (XP) – V – Vf – (XP)). The only plausible analysis for this pattern is one where Vf is in the base-generated position V1 in 13). This position is not adjacent to I; if the appropriate finiteness features are to reach Vf, we have to assume a downgrading rule. Such rules are problematic by current theoretical standards. The pattern 12a) seems to reflect rather a structure with I in final position. To make the contrast clear, two variant subtrees of I'1 in 13) are given in 16a) and 16b):



16a) is a subtree of 13); assuming movement of V to I, this yields Pintzuk's and Noteboom's and Noteboom's analysis of pattern 12c) and 12d), though it is problematic as an analysis of 12c), as noted; 16b) is a subtree with I base generated to the right of V''; again assuming movement of V to I, this seems to provide the right sort of analysis for 12a), and of 12b) and 12c) if one assumes V(P)R. The drawback here is that it does not explain the very high frequency of 12d).

I believe that the right way of solving this problem is by treating 16a) and 16b) as variant structures for OE, the evidence for 16a) being the high frequency of 12d); the evidence for 16b) being the existence of the patterns 12a) and 12c) (with VPR) and presumably also of 12b) (with VR). This does not mean that we depart from the assumption of one underlying order for OE: the underlying order in both cases is still SOV. Rather, the structural difference is in the interpretation of the position of the functional head I in relation to the position of the verb.

An analysis in terms of two variant structures is not completely novel: Kroch (1989) suggests that they form an important key in the understanding of syntactic variation and change. Observe that the variant structures in 16) may give us some more understanding of the developments taking place in the transition from OE SOV to ME SVO: if we assume these two variants for OE, and the process of extraposition cum heavy NP-shift discussed above,

<sup>10</sup> Although 12a) is considerably more frequent than 12b).

involving rightward movement of verbal complements and thus resulting in VO-like structures, it is to be expected that the structure 16a), in conjunction with VO-like orders, eventually came to be preferred.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> There is a lot more detail that can be added about the specifics of nominal position, but this would go beyond the scope of this article.