Changes in English word order and the loss of VSO

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Abstract: The present paper investigates the Verb-Subject-Object order in the history of English. On the basis of current theoretical approaches to word order, we argue that in the diachrony of English, both derivations of VSO order (cf. Roussou & Tsimpli 2006) could be found. VSO clauses are allowed due to the strong D-features of English until the 12th century (when English DPs were inflected for case and phi-features); however, VSO orders were not lost in Middle English (when the loss of case distinctions occurred) as Middle English changed to a CP-V2 language (cf. Kroch & Taylor 1997).

Keywords: English diachrony, language change, word order, VSO, expletive pro-drop, D-features, V2

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the V(erb) S(ubject) O(object) order in the history of English with respect to current theoretical approaches to word order. VSO is ungrammatical in Modern English but it was a grammatical order for Old and Middle English. The evolution of VSO order is of importance, as VSO order is not even allowed in all pro-drop languages (cf. Modern Greek and Modern Spanish vs. Modern Italian, Roussou & Tsimpli 2006).

Previous research on the diachronic development of word order in English has dealt extensively with the change to VO order. One of the most prominent changes in the history of English syntax is the shift from the grammatical orders of Old English OV and VO to the only grammatical order of Modern English, VO (van Kemenade 1987; Lightfoot 1991; Pintzuk 2005). Studies of the OV/VO alternation in Old English include, among others, Lightfoot (1979), van Kemenade (1987), Allen (1999), Roberts (1997) and Pintzuk (1999, 2002), while van der Wurff (1997), Kroch & Taylor (2000), Trips (2002), Biberauer & Roberts (2005) have analyzed the subsequent development of OV order in Early and Late Middle English. The usual chronology for the loss of OV in English situates it in Early Middle English (Canale 1978; van Kemenade 1987; Lightfoot 1991; Roberts 1997; Kroch & Taylor 1994; Fischer et al. 2000), but persisting OV orders are found until the 15th century (Fischer et al. 2000: 177).

VSO order constitutes one word order found in Old and Middle English, which, along with the subsequent changes it underwent in the history of English, is less discussed. Old and Middle English were expletive pro-drop languages; no subject was used in various types of constructions which, in Modern English, would have the overt expletives it or there (ex. 1a-b). Expletive pro-drop involves the omission of a non-thematic subject, as in impersonal sentences, as opposed to full pro-drop, which is defined as omission of a subject that has a thematic role\(^1\).

\(^*\) I would like to thank Ann Taylor and Susan Pintzuk for their help with the electronic corpora. All errors are my own.

\(^1\) There is some disagreement as to whether full pro-drop is possible in the older Germanic languages, in particular Gothic, Old Norse, Old High German, and Old English. In these languages, there are cases where subject pronouns have no phonological realization (see Abraham 1991, van Gelderen 2000);
and swa miclum sniwde swelce
and pro so heavily snowed as if
‘and it snowed so heavily, as if’ (Epist. Alex., 159, 538)

and again pro is written that
‘and it is again written that’ (ÆLet4, 31.147)

Old and Middle English allow not only VOS and VS (2a) -as all pro-drop languages do- but also VSO order (2b):

and egeslice spæc Gregorius be ðam
and sternly spoke Gregorius about that
‘and Gregorius spoke sternly about that’ (Wulfstan, 202.46)

on his dagum sende Gregorius us fulluht
in his days sent Gregory us baptism
‘in his time, Gregory sent us Christianity’ (ChroA2, 18.565.1)

The question that arises is why Old and Middle English are like Modern Greek and Modern Spanish (cf. Roussou & Tsimpli 2006), which permit VSO order, and not like Modern Italian, in which VSO order is disallowed.

2 Recent approaches to word order for Old and Middle English

2.1 VSO order and theory of word order

It would be very interesting to see how VSO is derived in the system of expletive pro-drop languages, like Old and Middle English, and whether it matches Modern Greek or Modern Spanish or neither.

Furthermore, the analysis of the VSO order is of great interest for theoretical approaches to word order. For Modern Greek (which allows VSO) Spyropoulos & Philippaki-Warburton (2001) argue that the canonical subject position is postverbal (VS) and inside the VP. The EPP is satisfied by a null clitic in the T projection, leaving the thematic subject position either unrealized or realized as a postverbal DP. Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou (2001) argue that in VSO in Modern Greek both the subject and the object remain inside the VP. Movement of V to T suffices to check the Case feature of the subject, as the agreement affix on V behaves like a clitic and clitics in Modern Greek are the spell-out of formal features. Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou claim that the absence of clitic-doubling in Modern Italian (which does not allow VSO, but has V-movement, rich agreement and clitics) blocks the grammaticality of the VSO order. On the other hand, Belletti (2001, 2004) attributed the blocking of the VSO order in Modern Italian to the intervening effect (Relativized Minimality) of the subject in Spec,FocP, which prevents the association of the object DP with a higher functional position for Case-feature checking. Roussou & Tsimpli (2006) rightly question the correlation of VSO order with clitic-doubling, as there is no reason why the availability of a certain type of cliticization would affect the position of the subject in contexts however, the distribution of such cases is quite different from what is otherwise found for full pro-drop languages.

where there is no object clitic present. Furthermore, Roussou & Tsimpli doubt the correlation of the ungrammaticality of the VSO order with locality, as this restriction does not hold in other Romance languages, such as Modern Spanish (Roussou & Tsimpli 2006: 320). In the discussion that follows, we will show that Middle English data confirm this objection.

According to Roussou & Tsimpli’s approach (assuming the presence of (recursive) Clitic-shells in the clause structure), VSO may be the output of two derivations: the first would involve V in d(omain)T, and S and O in dV, while the second would involve V in C, S in dT and O in dV (cf. 3a, b, from Roussou & Tsimpli 2006: 329, ex. 17):

(3a) \[ T \text{ estile} \quad [C_1 \text{o} \quad \text{Petros} \quad [C_2 \text{to} \quad \text{grama} \quad [V \quad t_v \r ]] ] ]

(3b) \[ C \text{ estile} \quad [C_1 \text{o} \quad \text{Petros} \quad [T \quad t_v \quad [C_1 \quad [C_2 \text{to} \quad \text{grama} \quad [V \quad t_v \r ] ] ] ] ] ]

Modern Greek and Modern Spanish both exhibit VSO order, but they select different derivations to express this order (Modern Spanish uses only the second derivation). Roussou & Tsimpli argue that the parametric difference (pro-drop languages that do or do not allow VSO order) can be reduced to a parameter which relates to the D-system of the two grammars: in Modern Greek DPs inflect for case and phi-features, while in Modern Italian they do not. As a result of this difference, a subject DP and an object DP cannot both occur in the same domain in Modern Italian, but they can in Modern Greek.

2.2 VSO in the history of English: different D-features and V2
Returning to the grammaticality of VSO orders in Old English, (in contrast to the ungrammaticality of this order in Modern English\(^3\) -which is, however, a non-pro-drop language- and Modern Italian -which is a pro-drop language that does not allow VSO order), we argue that VSO orders in the history of English can be seen as examples of both types of VSO derivation: availability of VSO order due to strong D-features (Old English VSO orders; Modern Greek-type) and V2-characteristics (Middle English VSO orders; Modern Spanish-type). Consequently, VSO orders in the history of English confirm both proposed types of VSO derivation. In (4a-c), we present some characteristic examples of the VSO order in Old English:

(4a) \(\text{þa ge-mette} \quad \text{he scead} \text{an} \quad \text{then met he robbers} \quad \text{‘then, he met the robbers’ (AELS, 31.151)}\)

(4b) \(\text{þa sende} \quad \text{he Gearam} \quad \text{þone bis} \text{cop} \quad \text{then sent he Jaruman the bishop} \quad \text{‘then, he sent Jaruman, the bishop’ (cobede, Bede_3:22.250.17.2554)}\)

(4c) \(\text{tynde} \quad \text{he his books} \quad \text{closed he his books} \quad \text{‘he closed his books’ (cobede, Bede_4:3.268.19.2727)}\)

The subject pronoun often inverts with the verb in sentences introduced by \(\text{þa} \text{ and} \text{ þonne ‘then’}. Many cases of the Auxiliary Verb-Subject-Object order are also attested:

(5a) \(\text{hæfdon} \quad \text{hi hiora onfangen} \quad \text{had they them received} \quad \text{‘they had received them’ (ASC, Parker, 894)}\)

\(^{3}\text{Cf. also Tsimpli 1999.}\)
The following example is quite interesting, as the indirect object is fronted, but the subject and the direct object remain post-verbal.

(6a) *Him geaf ða se cyngc twa hund gilderna ðænega*

him gave then the king two hundred golden pennies

‘then, the king gave him two hundred golden pence’ (Apollo, 42.51.20)

The rich inflectional system of Old English appears to allow the post-verbal position of both subject and object, as in Modern Greek. Four cases were productive in Old English: nominative, accusative, dative and genitive. A complete description of Old English morphology is far beyond the scope of our paper, but here we will focus on the rich D-system of Old English, mainly as it compares to the system of Middle English. Table 1 presents the paradigm for a class of nouns, the *masculine a-stems*. What is particularly interesting is that the distinction between the nominative and accusative cases in Old English is better reflected in the forms of adjectives and demonstratives. The paradigms for the definite determiners are given in table 2.

Table 1. Masculine *a*-stems in Old English (from Allen 1999: 161)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SG</th>
<th>PL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NOM</td>
<td>stān</td>
<td>stānas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACC</td>
<td>stān</td>
<td>stānas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEN</td>
<td>stānes</td>
<td>stāna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAT</td>
<td>stāne</td>
<td>stānum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. The definite determiner in Old English (from Allen 1999: 165)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Feminine</th>
<th>Neuter</th>
<th>Plural-all genders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NOM</td>
<td>se</td>
<td>sēo</td>
<td>þæt</td>
<td>þæm (masculine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACC</td>
<td>þone</td>
<td>þā</td>
<td>þæt</td>
<td>þæm (masculine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEN</td>
<td>þæs</td>
<td>þære</td>
<td>þæs</td>
<td>þæm (masculine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAT</td>
<td>þæm</td>
<td>þære</td>
<td>þæm</td>
<td>þæm (masculine)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By the end of the Old English period, syncretism in nominal morphology had taken place. One of the phonological processes which contributed to syncretism was the reduction in the variety of vowels found in final unstressed syllables. The distinction between the back vowels in final unstressed syllables was already showing signs of weakening in the ninth century, and was completed in Northumbrian in the tenth century, according to Campbell (1959). By the late Old English period, the only distinction in the vowels of suffixes was between front and back. This distinction disappeared in the eleventh century, by which time the front and back vowels had largely coalesced (Campbell 1959; Allen 1999). Moreover, towards the end of the Old English period, two phonological changes had a widespread effect on the inflection of adjectives and determiners. The first change was a replacement of /m/ by /n/.
(1928) argues that this change was completed by the end of the eleventh century. The syncretism became more generalized when the loss of final /n/ in unstressed syllables quickly followed. This change affected the new /n/ as well as the old ones; as a result, there was no longer any distinction between the nominative and accusative singular forms for any masculine nouns. With the reduction of final vowels and the loss of the final nasal, these nouns became indeclinable, and the formal distinction between nominative and accusative disappeared for all nouns. The case distinctions for adjectives disappeared even earlier than for the other word classes. On the other hand, the system of grammatical gender was not retained in dialects which had lost the ability to make the old case distinctions (Allen 1999; for a detailed discussion of the disappearance of grammatical gender in Middle English, cf. Jones 1988). The rapidity of the loss of case-marking distinctions in Early Middle English has sometimes been taken as evidence that Middle English should be considered a creole (cf. Bailey & Maroldt 1977 and Poussa 1982, among others). On the basis of the above remarks on the D-system of Old English and its subsequent changes in Middle English, it is clear that VSO clauses are permitted due to the strong D-features of English until the 12th century (when English DPs inflect for case and phi-features); a subject DP and an object DP can both occur in the same domain in English until that period.

In contrast, VSO orders in Middle English cannot be attributed to strong D-features. However, we argue that the reason why VSO orders were not lost in Middle English (when the loss of the case distinctions occurred) is another change that happened during this period, i.e. the change of English to a CP-V2 language. Several studies have proposed that V2 order involves movement to one of two different positions: in German, Dutch and Mainland Scandinavian (CP-V2 languages, according to Kroch & Taylor 1997), V2 order results from movement of the Verb to the head of C and movement of some XP to SpecCP. V2 word order can also reflect (for example, in Icelandic and Yiddish) movement of the Verb to a lower position (highest projection below C, Infl or T – Kroch & Taylor call these languages IP-V2 languages). Pintzuk (1993, 1999) has shown that the Verb in Old English V2 clauses surfaces in the Infl (T) position; thus, Old English is an InflP(TP)-V2 language, rather than a CP-V2 language (like German and Dutch). Furthermore, given that V-to-Infl movement depends on rich agreement and that the Northern Middle English system of endings does not make enough distinctions to support movement, Kroch & Taylor conclude that the northern dialect must have first started as a CP-V2 language; the northern dialect of Middle English, due to the extensive contact it had with Medieval Scandinavian, developed first the verb-movement syntax of a CP-V2 language.

CP-V2 was already being lost by around 1400 (van Kemenade 1987), but it should be noted that V2 had not completely disappeared in Late Middle English. Two examples of V2 orders are given below (from Haeberli 2002a):

(7a) and on the same day send the Kinge the third privye seale to you

‘and on the same day, the king sent the third privy seal to you’ (Prin, CPaston, 202.258)

(7b) and muche sorow had sir Gawayne to avoyde his horse

‘and Sir Gawayne had much difficulty to dismount from his horse’ (Malory, 201.420)
Example (7a) displays a residual VSO order that can be related to the remaining V2 orders of Late Middle English. Haeberli (2002a, b) argues that remaining cases of V2 can still be found throughout the 15th century. After the 15th century, VSO order is not productively attested (similar to V2 characteristics); consequently, not only did the loss of V2 and the loss of expletive pro-drop coincide historically (Hulk & van Kemenade 1995: 249), but the loss of VSO order did as well.

Inversion (VS) is still possible in some contexts in Modern English with copula be in predicate fronting and with main verbs in restricted contexts, as locative inversion and quotative inversion. It appears that Modern English also displays what is often referred to as residual V2 (cf. Bresnan 1994): it has subject-auxiliary inversion in questions and VP inversion constructions in declaratives, where the whole verbal cluster appears before the subject (An excellent appetizer is the squib ravioli with garlic sauce, Birner 1995: 242). On the other hand, such inversion is ungrammatical with transitive verbs: postverbal subjects cannot occur with another argument. As is obvious, transitive verbs are a context where there was a clear loss (*VSO).

(8a) In every country can be found individuals who dislike books
(8b) *In every country can find an individual a book that s/he dislikes

To sum up, the diachronic development of English exhibits evidence in favor of both VSO derivations. The VSO in Middle English does not involve the realisation of both DP arguments in dV. Middle English, then, is more like Modern Spanish and Modern Italian, and only superficially appears to resemble Old English. Old English resembles Modern Greek in that the D-system permits the presence of both subjects and objects post-verbally (in domain V), Middle English resembles Spanish, which is considered by Roussou & Tsimpli as a cross between pro-drop languages with VSO and pro-drop languages without VSO. According to Zubizarreta (1998), VSO in Modern Spanish is a residue from Old Spanish, which exhibited full V2.

3. Concluding remarks: the cross-linguistic diachronic evidence

The diachronic data from English have shown that syntactic change follows the pro-drop parameter, which correlates the availability of null subjects with the presence of VSO. Old and Middle English allow null expletive-subjects and VSO -in Old English, rich case morphology permits the derivation of the VSO order, in Middle English, the derivation of the VSO order is related to the CP-V2 characteristics of the language; Modern English allows neither null expletives nor VSO.

In this last section, we attempt to sketch out a comparison of the diachronic development of English word order with that of Greek, Spanish and Italian. According to previous analyses of Ancient Greek (Ebeling 1902; Frisk 1932; Dover 1968; Friedrich 1975; Cervin 1990) both OV and VO orders have been argued for (with a slight bias in favor of OV). Taylor (1994) claims that the data for Ancient Greek reflect an ongoing change from verb-final (OV) to verb-medial (VO) orders beginning at or before Homer and ending with Hellenistic Koine (similar to the history of English but without the loss of OV order). This shift does not influence the presence of VSO orders, which are attested in Homeric, Classical and Hellenistic Koine Greek (cf. 9a, b, c)⁴:

(9a) Homeric Greek – VSO
gno:i de kai Atreides euru kreio:n
may-recognize prt also son-of-Atreus.NOM wide.NOM ruling.NOM

Agamemnon.NOM his.ACC blindness.ACC
‘the son of Atreus, wide-ruling Agamemnon, may know his blindness’ (Homer, Iliad 1.411)

(9b) Classical Greek – VSO
ekhei de ho moskhos houtos ho Apis
has prt the.NOM calf.NOM this.NOM the.NOM Apis.NOM
 kaleomenos se:me:ia toiade
being-called.NOM marks.ACC the-following.ACC
‘this calf, which is called Apis, has the following marks’ (Herodotus, 3.28.3)

(9c) Hellenistic Koine – VSO
apostelei ho hyios tou anthro:pou tous aggelous autou
sends the.NOM son.NOM the.GEN man.GEN the.ACC angel.ACC his
‘the son of man sends his angels’ (N. T., Evang. Matthaueum, 13, 41)

As Table 3 shows, there is only a small increase of postverbal subjects from the Homeric to the Hellenistic Koine periods.

Table 3. Distribution of clause types in Homer, Herodotus and Luke; VSX in contrast to the other orders (from Taylor 1994: 10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Homer</th>
<th>Herodotus</th>
<th>Luke</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VSX</td>
<td>.07 (8)</td>
<td>.15 (20)</td>
<td>.25 (25)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As far as the history of Italian and Spanish is concerned, Old Romance is considered a pro-drop and V2 language, although the root versus embedded asymmetry is not found in Southern Italian varieties or in Spanish (Benincà 1984; Fontana 1993). In all Old Romance languages subject inversion of the Germanic type (Auxiliary Verb-Subject-Participle order) and the VSO order are attested. In Old Italian both OV and VO orders were grammatical (cf. Polletto 2002, 2006). Old Italian shows some (but not all) of the typical correlates traditionally associated with the V2 property, most importantly subject inversion between the auxiliary and the past participle (Benincà 1984). This property was lost during the Renaissance and is not found in Modern Italian. V2-characteristics were lost at the same time as IP scrambling, past participle agreement, and DP scrambling; they all occur in restricted contexts (such as relative clauses and modals) in Renaissance texts.

Regarding the development of Spanish, the constituent order of Old Spanish differs from that of Modern Spanish, as in Old Spanish only phrases headed by articles, complementizers and prepositions were head-initial. Nouns, adjectives and verbs allowed both complement-head and head-complement order (cf. Zagona 2002). As far as the basic order of the verb and its object is concerned, it has switched from OV to VO order (cf. Saltarelli 1994). Fontana (1993) argues that Old Spanish is a V2 language but of the Icelandic type, i.e. with verbs occupying second position in subordinate clauses as well. VSO in Modern Spanish is said by Zubizaretta (1998) to be a residue from Old Spanish. The difference, for Zubizarreta, is that V2 in Old Spanish was also connected to the syncretic status of T, which could attract any XP to its specifier, and not just the subject.

What we conclude from the above observed diachronic tendencies in English (as compared to Greek, Spanish and Italian) regarding first, VSO derivation (Roussou & Tsimpili’s 2006 approach) and second, the relationship between V2-characteristics and VSO order with language change are as follows:
(i) The first generalization arising from the diachronic data is that if a language has VSO (in dV), then it also has null or null-expletive subjects (but not vice versa): Old English, Ancient and Modern Greek.

(ii) The relation of VSO order to D-features is confirmed; VSO order (S and O in domain V) is allowed when D-features are strong (Old English vs. Middle English).

(iii) The VSO order that occurs in V2 languages is not diachronically stable, as loss of V2 may end in loss of the VSO order (English, Italian). On the other hand, the presence of the VSO order in a non-V2 language (if the D-features remain strong) is significantly stable (Greek). In table (4), we present schematically the above diachronic observations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old English</th>
<th>Middle English</th>
<th>Modern English</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>expletive pro-drop</td>
<td>expletive pro-drop</td>
<td>non expletive pro-drop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strong D-features</td>
<td>weak D-features</td>
<td>weak D-features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TP-V2</td>
<td>CP-V2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VSO</td>
<td>VSO</td>
<td>*VSO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Modern Greek | Modern Italian | Modern Spanish |
<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pro-drop</td>
<td>pro-drop</td>
<td>pro-drop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strong D-features</td>
<td>weak D-features</td>
<td>weak D-features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(T-syncretism (TP-V2) )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VSO</td>
<td>*VSO</td>
<td>VSO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, we can argue that the relationship between V2 characteristics and VSO order is quite strong, as they can be linked in terms of Lightfoot’s (1999, 2006) cue-based approach to language acquisition and change. According to Lightfoot, linguistic structures have designated cues which are expressed in certain clauses in the primary linguistic data that children are exposed to. Lightfoot (2006: 86) argues that the cue for V2 is as in (10) (which he characterizes as a piece of structure “where a phrasal category occurs in the Specifier of a CP whose head is occupied by a verb”) and that this cue is expressed in non-subject-initial clauses.

(10) Cue for V2 syntax: CP[XP c V...]

What is crucial here is that, since the subject-initial SVO structures are ambiguous with respect to the position of the subject (in SpecTP or SpecCP), and consequently between an SVO or a V2 grammar, XVS orders are the cue for a V2 language; it is this specific order (the cue for V2 languages) that derives XVS order with a transitive verb.

References


