

Why Prepositional Stranding Was So Restricted in Old English

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Goh, Gwang-Yoon. 2001. **Why Prepositional Stranding Was So Restricted in Old English**. *Korean Journal of English Language and Linguistics* 1-1, 1-17. The displacement of the prepositional object from PP (DPO) was strictly prohibited in Old English (OE). No matter how such a prohibition is theoretically analyzed, it seems clear that OE had some sort of constraint against DPO. In this paper, I address the issue of what motivated the constraint by explaining what made DPO so difficult in OE. In particular, on the basis of the discussion about relative obliqueness among OE NP arguments, I propose that what was behind the constraint is both a high degree of obliqueness of OE prepositional arguments, which was rigidly marked and represented by the preposition as an obliqueness marker, and the representation and maintenance of relative obliqueness among OE NP arguments.

1. A Constraint on Prepositional Stranding in Old English¹⁾

Although prepositional stranding (P-Stranding), in which a preposition is not followed by its object, as in (1) below, is freely allowed in many Modern English (ModE) constructions,²⁾

¹The following abbreviations are used throughout this paper: OE (ME, ModE) = Old (Middle, Modern) English, NP = noun phrase, P = preposition, P-Stranding = prepositional stranding, V = verb, P-V compound = preposition-verb compound, PP = prepositional phrase, PO = prepositional object, DPO = the displacement of PO from PP and its occurrence in a non-canonical position.

²The ModE constructions in which P-Stranding is possible include the following: *wh*-questions, relative clauses, (pseudo-)cleft constructions, complement object deletions, comparative constructions, topicalizations, exclamations, the prepositional passive, and *tough*-constructions.

Old English (OE) had only a highly restricted form of P-Stranding. Above all, P-Stranding in OE was possible in four types of relative clauses: *þe*-relative clauses, which roughly correspond to *that*-relative clauses in later English, zero relative clauses, free relative clauses, and infinitival relatives, as follows:

- (1) (a) In which computer did you install the program?
 (b) Which computer did you install the program in?
- (2) (a) He wæs swyðe spedig man on þæm æhtum
 he was very wealthy man in those possessions
þe heora speda on beoð ...
 that their wealth in is ...
 'He was a very wealthy man in those possessions
 that their wealth lies in ...' (Or 15.7)
- (b) ðonne is oþer stow elreordge men beoð on
 then is other place barbarous men are in
 'then, there is (an)other place barbarous men live in'
 (Marv 18.1)
- (c) And heo gefret softnysse oððe sarnysse,
 and it feels softness or pain
swa hwæðer swa heo on bið
 so which [acc] as it in is
 'And it feels softness or pain, whichever it is in'
 (ÆHom 11.218)
- (d) Eanflæd seo cwen ... bæd Osweo þone cyning
 Eanflæd the queen ... bade Osweo the king
 ðæt he þær forgefe stowe mynster on to timbrebbe
 that he there gave place minster on to build
 þæm foresprecenan Gode þeowe Trumhere
 to the afore-mentioned Gods servant Trumhere
 'Queen Eanflæd bade king Osweo to give the afore-
 mentioned Trumhere, God's servant, a place to build

an abbey on' (Bede 3.18.238.21)

Another OE prepositional construction in which P-Stranding was allowed is the so-called complement object deletion construction, which involves a special group of adjectives followed by an infinitival phrase (e.g., *The flower is pretty to look at*), as follows:

(3) heo wæs swiþe fæger an to locianne;
 it was very beautiful at to look
 'it was very beautiful to look at' (Or 74.12)

Finally, P-Stranding was also possible in comparative constructions, as in (4), below. Note that the prepositional object (PO) in the clause after *þonne* is missing, thus making P-Stranding in that clause is obligatory:

(4) seo is bradre þonne ænig man ofer seon mæge
 it is broader than any man across see may
 'it is broader than any man can see across'
 (Or 1 1.19.18 [Traugott: 1992: 225])

Except for the above six cases so far considered, no other type of P-Stranding is attested in OE. Note that none of these P-Stranding types attested in OE involve the displacement of PO from PP and its occurrence in a non-canonical position (DPO, i.e., ... NP_i ... [pp P t_i] ...).³ Note also that all the unattested

³In the terminology of transformational grammar, DPO would be described as NP movement out of PP. Note that for the purpose of this study, it doesn't matter whether the non-canonical positioning of the PO is a result of movement or base-generation. What is relevant here is that it is there, not how it got there. That is, the overt NP which should be the PO of the stranded preposition is missing in every case of OE P-Stranding. See Goh (2000b, ch.2) for a more detailed discussion of P-Stranding and DPO in OE.

(potential) types of P-Stranding must have DPO in OE. All this strongly suggests that DPO was strictly prohibited in OE, allowing for the formation of an OE constraint against DPO: *... NP_i ... [_{PP} P t_i] ... I refer to this constraint as *DPO.⁴

So far, we have seen that DPO (the displacement of PO from PP and its occurrence in a non-canonical position) was strictly prohibited, and no matter how such a prohibition is theoretically analyzed, it seems clear that OE had some sort of constraint against DPO. In the remainder of this paper, I will address the issue of what motivates the constraint by explaining what made DPO so difficult in OE. In particular, on the basis of the discussion about relative obliqueness given in Goh (2000a), I will propose that what was behind the constraint is both a high degree of obliqueness of OE prepositional arguments, which was rigidly marked and represented by preposition as an obliqueness marker, and the representation and maintenance of relative obliqueness among OE NP arguments.

2. Prepositions as Obliqueness Markers in Old English

There was a very rigid distinction among OE verbal arguments with regard to their morphological cases, especially between accusative NPs and NPs of other cases, which is clearly revealed in their passivization possibilities: personal passive for accusative

⁴A similar observation about the impossibility of movement out of PP (and the obligatoriness of pied piping) in the above OE constructions has often been made, PP in OE being suggested as an island (out of which no movement is allowed), in many previous studies within derivational frameworks (e.g., van Riemsdijk 1978; Allen 1980a, 1980b; Hornstein & Weinberg 1981; Kayne 1981a, 1981b; Lightfoot 1981; Bennis & Hoekstra 1984). Most previous studies, however, put their emphasis on the analysis of the constraint against movement out of PP in OE mainly from a theoretical standpoint and ignore why OE had such a constraint and what made it change in ME, aspects which are indispensable for a complete account of the changes in P-Stranding.

NPs versus impersonal passive for NPs of other object cases. Since this distinction is based on passivization possibilities and passivization possibilities in turn are often related to the notion of obliqueness in the way that the easier it is for an (object) NP to be passivized, the less oblique that NP is, the distinction enables us to propose the following obliqueness hierarchy (Goh 2000a):

- (5) Obliqueness hierarchy for Old English verbal arguments
Accusative < Dative ≤ Genitive

In addition, the investigation of OE preposition-verb (P-V) compounds and their case government in Goh (1999, 2000a) shows that relative obliqueness exists between verbal arguments and prepositional arguments and that it is systematically maintained in subcategorization inheritance through OE P-V compounding. That is, when a prepositional argument is composed as a verbal argument, it always takes a case that is more oblique than the case of the original verbal argument. This means that OE prepositional arguments are always more oblique than verbal arguments, regardless of the morphological cases involved. Thus, the following extended obliqueness hierarchy including prepositional arguments can be given:

- (6) Obliqueness hierarchy among Old English NP arguments
(a) Nominative < Accusative < Dative ≤ Genitive
(b) Verbal arguments < Prepositional arguments

In fact, the relative obliqueness between verbal and prepositional arguments is expected because the obliqueness hierarchy among verbal arguments is originally based on their potential for passivization and also because passivization in any form (i.e., personal or impersonal) was not allowed for OE

prepositional arguments. Such relative obliqueness between verbal arguments and prepositional arguments is not at all unusual, and this is suggested by the fact that although passive constructions have been reported in all the main language families, the prepositional passive is found in only a very small number of languages of the world (Siewierska 1984:23).

The high degree of obliqueness of OE prepositional arguments is well supported by the productivity of P-V compounding in OE. As is well known, OE had very productive compounding of P and V. Thus, many compounds of the form P-V such as the following examples are found in OE, even for those prepositions that are no longer used as prefixes in ModE.

(7) *æt* + V

æt-beran 'to carry to', *-feolan* 'to stick to', *-fon* 'to seize upon', *-gangan* 'to go to', *-sittan* 'to sit by', *-slæpan* 'to sleep beside', *-spornan* 'to strike against', *-stæppan* 'to step up to', *-standan* 'to stand at', *-wenian* 'to wean from', etc.

(8) *in* + V ⁵⁾

in-beslean 'to hack into', *-blawan* 'to breath upon', *-bredan* 'to burst in upon', *-cuman* 'to come in', *-erdian* 'to dwell in', *-feran* 'to enter in', *-feallan* 'to fall in', *-gan* 'to go in', *-gangan* 'to go in', *-geotan* 'to pour in', etc.

(9) *ƀurh* + V

ƀurh-blawan 'to inspire', *-borian* 'to bore through', *-brecan* 'to break through', *-creopan* 'to creep through', *-delfan* 'to dig through', *-drifan* 'to drive through', *-dufan* 'to dive through', *-etan* 'to eat through', *-faran* 'to pass through', *-fleon* 'to fly through', *-gan* 'to go through', *-hiernan* 'to run

⁵Although they are not productive, a few traces of *in-* and a verb still remain (e.g., *income*, *incoming*).

through', *-ræsan* 'to rush through', *-secan* 'to search through', *-sceotan* 'to shoot through', *-scinan* 'to shine through', *-seon* 'to look through', *-stingan* 'to pierce through', *-swimman* 'to swim through', *-wadan* 'to go through', *-wlitan* 'to look through', *-wundian* 'to pierce through', etc.

This unusual productivity of OE P-V compounding, together with the highly transparent argument structures of many OE P-V compounds (Kim 1997, Goh 1999), suggests that most selected prepositional arguments in later English may have occurred as a verbal argument of P-V compounds in OE. This likelihood is also supported by the fact that in the ME period English lost most OE P-V compounds: many of the P-V compounds (and some simplex verbs) were replaced by (new) V-P phrases or prepositional verbs of new or the same components (Fischer 1992: 386). Through this process, many verbal arguments, which could be passivized (personally or impersonally) in OE, changed to prepositional arguments, thus maintaining the passivizable degree of obliqueness.⁶

Thus, many early examples of the prepositional passive in ME have prepositional verbs or V-P phrases whose OE counterparts in the respect of form or meaning are P-V compounds, as

⁶The passive subject *þæt scyp* in (i) below is originally a PO which has been inherited as a verbal object from the nonhead P *ofer*. Note that the P-V compound *ofer-geotan* has the corresponding V+P phrase, as in (ii):

- (i) swa þæt þæt scyp wearð ofer-goten mid yfum
 so that the ship became over-poured with water
 'so that the ship was being covered (<poured over) with water'
 (Mt 8.24)
- (ii) Ða wæs wopes hring hat heafodwylm ofer hleor goten
 then was of weeping sound hot tears over cheek poured
 'then there was the sound of weeping and hot tears poured over
 the cheek'
 (El 1131-3)

follows:⁷⁾

- (10) OE *be-licgan* 'to lie or sleep by/with' > ME *liggen bi*
 þis maiden ... feled also bi her þi |
 this maiden ... felt also by her thigh
 þat sche was yleyen bi
 that she had-been lain by
 'this maiden felt by her thigh that she had been lain with'
 (c1330 (?a1300) *Arth. & M.*(Auch) 849)
- (11) OE *ymb- or be-sprecan* 'to speak of/about' > ME *speken of*
 And þe comaundment ys brokun, | And þe halyday,
 and the commandment is broken and the holy day
 byfore of spokun.
 previously of spoken
 'And the commandment was broken, and the holy day
 previously spoken of'
 (a1400 (c1303) Mannyng, *HS* 1033)
- (12) OE *on-spætan* 'to spit upon' > ME *spitten (up)on*
 and aftyr he was turmentyd, and aftyr
 and afterwards he was tormented and afterwards
 he was spyt vpon
 he was spat upon (a1425 *Wycl.Serm.* I. 39.26)

In short, unlike the prepositional arguments of later English, OE prepositional arguments were absolutely as well as relatively more oblique than OE verbal arguments. Thus, true prepositional arguments in OE were always too oblique to be subcategorized for by a verb and therefore to be passivized.⁸⁾ Note that this

⁷ME examples are from Denison (1993). By providing these OE and ME examples, I do not mean to imply that prepositional verbs are functional replacements of OE P-V compounds, as is suggested in de la Cruz (1973).

high degree of obliqueness of prepositional arguments was systematically represented by prepositions. It is in this very sense that OE prepositions can be called obliqueness markers.⁹⁾

3. Flexibility of Surface Word Order in Old English

Although many studies, including generative ones such as Koopman (1985, 1990a, 1990b, 1992, 1995, 1997), Pintzuk (1991), and Pintzuk & Kroch (1985, 1989), have tried to show that there is a general tendency, especially at a deep level, towards SXV or SOV in OE word order, the surface word order is very flexible and, in many cases, can hardly be conclusive for determining the grammatical relationships among NPs in an OE sentence. In fact, most of the efforts to establish basic word orders in OE are mainly concerned with the relative order of subject and verb or with the position of the verb, often ignoring a large body of exceptions, many attested order possibilities, and some evidence of non-homogeneity within OE (Denison 1993:27-9; Fischer 1992: 370-2; Mitchell 1985: ch. IX, 1992:63).¹⁰⁾

For example, most transformational generative studies of OE syntax assume that the verb is generated in final position, although verb-final is not the most common of attested word orders (Denison 1993:35). Note that for determining the

⁸⁾For the relationship between subcategorization inheritance and passivization possibilities, see Goh (2000a).

⁹⁾Both morphological case endings and prepositions can be called obliqueness markers in the sense that the relative obliqueness among OE NP arguments is consistently represented and maintained by means of those two types of markers. In particular, OE prepositions can be called absolute obliqueness markers since any NP arguments marked (i.e., governed) by them are always too oblique to be passivized.

¹⁰⁾The order of sentential elements in OE was determined by a complex of grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, and discourse factors. In particular, although grammatical relations were important for the relative positions of subject and object, they played a less important role in determining the order of two objects (Allen 1995:30-50).

grammatical relationships involved in a sentence, the information about the relation between the object NP and other NPs (i.e., subject or other object NPs), which has hardly been dealt with in most studies of word order in OE, is indispensable. As Denison (1993:28) notes, the use of blanket labels like SVO or SOV, no matter how necessary for cross-linguistic comparison, is hardly practicable for OE. Thus, without the information encoded in the case endings, word order in OE still cannot do much to account for the determination of grammatical or semantic relationships in a sentence and this will be more than appropriate in the pre-OE or early OE period in which the main body of OE grammar must have been shaped.

In particular, an NP argument often doesn't seem to have any special restriction in its position with respect to other NP arguments in a sentence. Thus, an object NP could occur almost in any place in a sentence: it could follow the subject and V, precede the subject and V, or occur between the subject and V, as follows:

- (13) (a) We willaþ secgan eow sum byspel
 we wish to say you a parable
 'we want to tell you a parable' (ÆCHom i. 212.6)
- (b) Geseah ic wuldres treow wædum geweorðod
 saw I of glory tree with garments adorned
 'I saw the tree of glory adorned with garments'
 (Dream 14)
- (c) for þan þe he tæhte him þa gastlican lare
 for he taught them the spiritual learning
 'for he taught the spiritual learning' (ÆCHom i. 186.22)
- (14) (a) hine geswencte seo wædlung
 him afflicted the poverty
 'poverty afflicted him' (ÆCHom i. 332.9)

(b) and treowa he deþ færllice blowan
 and trees he causes suddenly bloom
 'and he causes trees to burst into bloom'
 (HomU 34 (Nap 42) 196.1 [Denison 1993: 174])

(c) þeah hit him man secge
 though it him one says
 'though people say it to him' (WHom 4.77)

(15) (a) Ic þe geþyldelice geyrde
 I you patiently hear
 'I will hear you patiently' (ÆCHom i. 590.2)

(b) þæt he mehte his feorh generian
 that he could his life save
 'so that he could save his life' (Or 48.18)

(c) and þæt he him and his geferan bigleofan
 and that he him and his companions food
 þenian wolde
 serve would
 'and that he would serve him and his companions food'
 (ÆCHom ii. 78.198)

Furthermore, no matter whether it is in poetry or prose, some adverbial phrase or clause could occur between V and its complement, especially an object, without causing any serious problems, as follows:

(16) (a) Geseah he *in recede* rinca manige,
 saw he in the building warriors many
 'He saw many warriors in the building' (Beo 728)

(b) Ond hiene þa Cynewulf *on Andred* adræfde,
 and him then Cynewulf in Andred drove out
 'And then Cynewulf drove him out from Andred'

(Chron 755.4)

This flexibility in surface word order in OE can be considered possible because like many other highly inflected languages, OE maintained the grammatical relationships among sentential elements mainly by encoding the various kinds of grammatical information in case endings and prepositions governing oblique prepositional arguments.

On the other hand, there was one conspicuous exception to such general flexibility in word order, that is, the relative word order of P and its object NP. P in OE could occur in one of the two positions with respect to its object NP: it could precede (as a pre-position) its pronominal or non-pronominal object NP or follow (as a post-position) its pronominal object NP, as in (17) and (18), respectively (Mitchell 1985: §§1061-2):

- (17) (a) *se fæder þurh hine gesceop us*
 the father through him created us
 'the father created us through him' (ÆCHom ii. 3.11)
- (b) *Symon me mid his englum geþiwde*
 Simon me with his angels threatened
 'Simon threatened me with his angels' (ÆCHom i. 378.1)
- (c) *Hu Moyses lædde Israhela folc from Egyptum*
 how Moses led Israelite people from Egypt
ofer þone Readan Sæ,
 over the Red Sea
 'How Moses led Israelite people from Egypt over
 the Red Sea' (Or 1. 16)
- (18) (a) *gehyrde myccle menigo him beforan feran*
 heard great multitude him before go
 'he heard a great multitude go before him'
 (BlHom 15.14)

- (b) Him to genealæhton his discipuli
 him to approached his disciples
 'His disciples approached him' (ÆCHom i. 548.25)

Thus, although surface word order in OE was highly flexible, it was much more difficult in OE to separate P and its object NP from each other than in ModE, which has a fixed word order, to the extent that this difficulty constitutes a rare constraint on the otherwise flexible word order in OE. Note that such rigidity in the relative position of P and its governing NP is very commonly observed in most languages with a highly flexible word order, for example, Japanese and Korean, in which the representation of grammatical relationships among NP arguments heavily depends on the relevant case markers.¹¹⁾¹²⁾

4. Motivations for the Old English Constraint on Prepositional Stranding

In spite of the high degree of flexibility of surface word order in OE, one constraint on syntactic operations which seems to be

¹¹Case markers may be postpositions but nothing crucial hinges on this. Thus, case markers here are used in a broad sense since in many languages such as Korean and Japanese they can encode almost any oblique relation and be attached even to a clausal argument, as in the following Japanese sentence:

- (i) Hanako-wa [s Taroo-ga zibun-o zibun-no hihan-kara
 Hanako-top Taroo-nom self-acc self-gen criticism-from
 mamorikir-e-nakatta] koto-o sitteita.
 defend-could-not comp-acc knew
 'Hanako knew that Taroo couldnt defend her/himself against
 her/his own criticism.'

¹²Note that ModE allows parentheticals between P and PO, as in *John left his money to, for all intents and purposes, the whole family*. However, there is no evidence that such a parenthetical insertion is possible in OE, as it is not in Japanese or Korean.

generally (although often implicitly) assumed can be applied also to OE syntax: no matter what syntactic operation sentential elements undergo, it should not create any (serious) confusion in the grammatical relationships.¹³⁾

In particular, such a constraint seems to be most relevant in the case of DPO since DPO is very likely to cause a confusion in grammatical relationships, especially relative obliqueness, which was very rigidly maintained in relevant morphosyntactic operations such as passivization and subcategorization inheritance. Note that case endings cannot play a decisive role for the distinction in the relative obliqueness between verbal and prepositional arguments. This is because both verbal and prepositional arguments mostly take accusative or dative in OE and therefore P is the only distinctive obliqueness marker. In this situation, DPO in a language with a high degree of flexibility of surface word order will make it very difficult to distinguish between verbal and prepositional arguments.

Thus, if a PO is displaced from PP and occurs in a non-canonical position, even general grammatical relationships as well as relative obliqueness will be very difficult to maintain, and therefore there wouldn't be any reasonable way to get the intended meaning of the relevant sentence. For example, if a PO is separated from its governor P in examples (17) and (18) above, it would be very difficult to decide whom the father created through whom in (17a), whom Simon threatened with whom in (17b), who led whom and how in (17c), and who went before whom in (18a). In spite of the general flexibility of word order in OE, therefore, the PO, with its governor P, should remain in its canonical position (i.e., within PP). There is therefore some functional motivation for why DPO was so

¹³Note that although such a general constraint on syntactic operation is probably not part of OE grammar, it is derivable from functional considerations.

difficult in OE.

Still, there may have been more to *DPO than just functional concerns. For speakers of such languages as German, Japanese and Korean, which have prepositions or post-positions as periphrastic case markers, separating an obliqueness marker such as a case marker and a preposition or post-position from its host or argument is hardly tolerable; in fact, it is judged totally unacceptable, regardless of the comprehensibility of the given sentence. Thus, there seems to be a purely syntactic side to *DPO. Moreover, DPO would entail the effacing of an inherent property (i.e., a certain degree of obliqueness) from the argument. Thus, *DPO seems to reflect a tendency for speakers to reject the separation of an obliqueness marker from an oblique argument.

5. Conclusion

In short, the (relative and absolute) obliqueness of NP arguments in OE was most systematically encoded through case endings and prepositions as their obliqueness markers and could be best represented and maintained only when each obliqueness marker remained in its original form (for case endings) and canonical position (for prepositions). In particular, DPO could bring about a serious problem in maintaining the grammatical and semantic relationships by altering or confusing relative obliqueness among NP arguments or at least by eliminating the absolute obliqueness of the prepositional argument. This is what motivated *DPO, and the changes related to this factor can be seen to have played a significant role in the advent of new P-Stranding patterns and the prepositional passive.

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