The independence of information status effects and the syntactic change from OV to VO in the history of English and Icelandic

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It is well-known that the position of constituents in the clause may be influenced by information structure (IS). If we define 'given' information as that known by or accessible to the hearer, and 'new' information as that not known and not accessible, the cross-linguistic generalization is that given information frequently comes early in the clause and new information is placed towards the end (see, for instance, the 'Given Before New Principle' of Gundel 1988). In languages such as Present-Day English (PDE), the position of arguments is largely fixed; there is little scope for IS to influence the position of particular arguments in basic SVO sentences. Nevertheless, in cases where there is scope for variation, e.g. in clauses affected by dative alternation or heavy-NP shift, alternative orders are produced, with the IS of the constituents clearly relevant to the ordering (see Arnold et al. 2000, Wasow and Arnold 2003 and references therein).

In contrast, word order in Old English (OE) is much freer than in PDE: the non-finite main verb (V) can appear either before or after the finite auxiliary (Aux), and the object can appear either before or after the main verb, as shown in (1). Therefore we might expect a tighter correlation between IS and object position in a wider range of OE clauses. Previous quantitative studies of OE (e.g. Bech 2001, Kohonen 1978, Taylor & Pintzuk 2009, 2010, to appear) that have looked at the effect of IS on OE word order confirm the "... general tendency to arrange constituents in a given-new perspective." (Kohonen 1978:191).

In this talk we investigate the relationship between syntactic change and IS with respect to alternations in OE and Early Middle English (EME) verb-object order, OV vs. VO. Over the OE and EME periods, two independent but interlocked syntactic changes take place: VAux is gradually replaced by AuxV, and OV is replaced by VO. Our main hypothesis is that the change from OV to VO and the constraints of IS are independent. The analysis we present is based on data from seven OE texts and three EME texts extracted from two syntactically annotated corpora. We consider three independent variables that influence the position of objects within the clause: text, IS and syntactic complexity. We show that while the syntax of the OE/EME VP is changing over time in AuxV clauses, this change is not in any way triggered by or related to changes in IS. Rather, the effects of IS remain constant over time. We use a model with two post-verbal object structures, one associated with focus and one with no particular IS constraints attached; we show that as the latter innovative structure increases in frequency over time at the expense of the former conservative variant, the proportion of new objects in post-verbal position approaches the proportion of new information objects in the text as a whole. We argue this is the result of the high proportion of new objects in post-verbal position in the conservative structure being increasingly diluted by the lack of an IS effect in the innovative structure, as the latter type increases over time. In addition, we show that, as predicted by the model, 1) there is no change in the frequency of new objects in pre-verbal position in AuxV clauses during the period of variation; 2) in VAux clauses there is no change in frequencies at all, in either pre- or post-verbal position, as these clauses are not affected by the change from OV to VO. Finally we use the data of Hróarsdóttir 2009 to show that the quantitative patterns our model predicts show up even more clearly in Icelandic, a related language undergoing the same change from OV to VO, strongly confirming our hypotheses. While we are not in a position to generalize our findings to other instances and types of syntactic change, it is clear that the change from OV to VO in English and Icelandic is independent of the effects of IS.

1) a. Aux O V
    Martianus <u>hæfde</u> **his sunu** ær   *befæst*
    Martin   had   his son   earlier established
    'Martin had earlier established his son'
    (coaelive,+ALS_[Julian_and_Basilissa]:184.1049)
  b. Aux V O
    swa þæt heo <u>bið</u> *forloren*   **þam ecan   life** (coaelive,+ALS_[Christmas]:144.117)
    so   that it   is   lost   (to) the   eternal life
    'so that it is lost to the eternal life'
  c. O V Aux
    gif heo **þæt bysmor** *forberan* <u>wolde</u>   (coaelive,+ALS_[Eugenia]:185.305)
    if   she that disgrace tolerate   would
    'if she would tolerate that disgrace'
  d. V Aux O
    he þæs   *habban* <u>sceal</u> **ece   edlean** on Godes rice   (cowulf,WHom_7:161.501)
    he of-that have   must eternal reward in God's kingdom
    'he must have eternal reward of that in God's kingdom.'

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