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 hæfde his sunu ær befaest
   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 bið forloren þam ecan life
   so that it is lost (to) the eternal life
   ‘so that it is lost to the eternal life’
   (coaelive,+ALS_[Christmas]:144.117)

c. O V Aux
   gif heo þæt bysmor forberan wolde
   if she that disgrace tolerate would
   ‘if she would tolerate that disgrace’
   (coaelive,+ALS_[Eugenia]:185.305)

d. V Aux O
   he þæs habban sceal ece edlean on Godes rice
   he of-that have must eternal reward in God’s kingdom
   ‘he must have eternal reward of that in God’s kingdom.’
   (cowulf,WHom_7:161.501)

References

Heaviness vs. Newness: The Effects of Structural Complexity and Discourse Status
on Constituent Ordering. Language 76.1, 28-55.

Bech, Kristin. 2001. Word order patterns in Old and Middle English: A syntactic and
pragmatic study. Doctoral dissertation, University of Bergen.

Typology, eds. Michael Hammond, Edith Moravcsik, and Jessica Wirth, 209-239.
Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Hróarsdóttir, Þorbjörg. 2009. OV languages: expressions of cues. In Hinterhölzl, Roland and
Svetlana Petrova (eds.), Information Structure and Language Change: New Approaches to

Kohonen, Vilja. 1978. On the development of English word order in religious prose around
1000 and 1200 A.D.: a quantitative study of word order in context. Åbo: Research
Institute of the Åbo Akademi Foundation.

Prince, Ellen. 1981. Toward a taxonomy of given-new information. In Radical pragmatics,

Taylor, Ann and Susan Pintzuk. 2009. Object position and focus in Old English. Paper
presented at Studies in the History of the English Language 6, Banff, Canada, April-May
2009.

Taylor, Ann, and Susan Pintzuk. 2010. VO order, clause type and information status in Old
English. Paper presented at the 10th Diachronic Generative Syntax Conference,
Cambridge, UK, July 2010.

Taylor, Ann and Susan Pintzuk. To appear. The Effect of Information Structure on Object
Position in the History of English, to appear in Los, Bettelou, Maria José Lopez-Couso,
and Anneli Meurman-Solin (eds.), Information Structure and Syntactic Change, (Oxford

In Günter Rohdenburg and Britta Mondorf (eds.) Determinants of Grammatical Variation