

# THE PRAGMATICS OF DIRECT OBJECT FRONTING IN HISTORICAL ENGLISH

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**Introduction** In this paper, we will consider an interesting paradox in the syntax and pragmatics of direct object (DO) fronting in historical English. On the one hand, there is evidence that Old English allowed a German-style fronting of unaccented elements, as shown by fronted pronouns in particular. This suggests a change in the pragmatic contexts for fronting across the history of English, as Modern English allows only accented DOs to front. On the other hand, quantitative evidence suggests a remarkable stability in the pragmatic contexts that allow fronting across all periods of English. We propose a resolution to this paradox by speculating that the loss of un-accented DO fronting was offset by a compensatory increase in the rate of prosodically accented DO fronting in the same information-structural context.

**Previous claims** Speyer (2008) discusses the phenomenon of object fronting (more traditionally termed *topicalization*) in historical English. Speyer argues that the pragmatic contexts which license object fronting are stable across the history of English, with one possible exception. He claims that a type of topic called  $\phi$ -topics, in which an anaphoric object refers to a topical proposition, may lead to object fronting in contemporary English (1). This is contrasted with so-called e-topics, in which the anaphoric object refers to a topical entity, which Speyer claims cannot be fronted in contemporary English. He observes, however, that such e-topics could be fronted in OE (2), linking their loss to a drop in the frequency of fronted pronominal objects (pronouns being a typical realization of e-topics) at the end of the OE period. Any examples of a fronted object pronoun after that period are predicted to bear a contrastive interpretation. Other studies, however, suggest that preverbal object pronouns in OE must be treated with caution. Building on previous claims, Wallenberg (2009) argues that in OE, object pronouns were (optionally) able to left-adjoin to T(ense) as clitics. This would suggest that an object appearing in the word order S-O<sub>pro</sub>-V<sub>tense</sub> is potentially analyzable as a clitic. The drop in preverbal object pronouns observed in Speyer (2008) may be due to the loss of this clitic position. Thus, the status of e-topics in the history of English, and their possible disappearance from the fronted position, must be reconsidered.

**Fronting and IS topics** *Contra* Speyer (2008), we note that so-called e-topics may front at least as late as Early Modern English (3). If there was any change in the context that licenses fronting in English, it is not captured by the distinction between e-topics and  $\phi$ -topics as Speyer claims. However, we will argue that a type of DO fronting has been lost, although it is not represented by the notion of e-topics. We show that Old English, like German (cf. Frey 2006), was able to front objects bearing no prosodic accent, best represented by a pronoun as in (4). We consider a smaller text sample by comparing an Old English translation of the New Testament, the West Saxon Gospels, to the Early Modern English translation by Tyndale; we find that examples of a fronted, un-accented pronoun in the West Saxon gospels are translated without fronting in the Tyndale. All examples of a fronted pronoun in the Tyndale translation require a strong accent on the pronoun in question. Here, we believe, a true distinction between Old and Modern English can be drawn: a German-like ability to front DPs without any prosodic accent was available in older stages of the language, but appears to have been lost by Early Modern English. We believe that this represents a subtle distinction in the information structural contexts of fronting as well, although the IS notion of a topic (or aboutness topic) may be too broad to distinguish between the e-topics in (3) and (4). We propose instead the use of the notion *continuing topic* to represent the un-accented direct objects that may be fronted in older stages of English.

**A quantitative perspective** In Fig. 1 we see that fronted pronoun and demonstrative DOs are both much more likely to occur in a sentence with subject-verb inversion in both OE and early Middle English (ME), including all examples with a verb-initial DO, strict V2 and otherwise. Note that V-S orders are higher across the board in ME, probably because the two corpora emphasize different dialect regions. The fact that demonstratives and pronouns behave alike in this regard suggests two things. First, the presence of fronted pronouns in OE is not entirely due to cliticization, since demonstratives are always strong pronouns in Germanic (cf. Cardinaletti and Starke 1995). Second, these elements likely participated in an unaccented fronting construction. This is unsurprising given the syntax of other Germanic languages. What is surprising is the data shown in Fig. 2. We see that, while pronouns exhibit the predicted drop-off in prevalence among fronted DOs, demonstratives continue to front at a high rate in all periods. Given the facts about Modern English, these must have become accented in later periods. The quantitative data is at odds with the idea that fronting became pragmatically more restricted over time. In fact, when we examine 100 samples of fronted full DP objects, which should be largely contrastive especially in later periods, we find that over half are judged to be non-contrastive using standard criteria.

**Analysis** We are left with the following picture: weak pronouns gradually decline in a fronted position after Old English, but demonstratives continue to topicalize at the same relative rate, and full DPs are equally likely to topicalize in non-contrastive pragmatic environments in all time periods. A possible resolution: we propose that phonologically accented fronting was extended to include continuing topics after un-accented DO fronting was lost. Un-accented pronouns are an ideal representative of continuing topics, leading them to front in Old English, but they are resistant enough to accenting that they disappeared from fronting constructions later on. Demonstratives essentially stepped in to fill the pragmatic gap as pronoun fronting declined. Thus, the pragmatic context of this construction remained stable, but the prosodic status of fronting has changed.

- (1) **This** we all know.
- (2) **Pone** asende se Sunu  
this sent the son  
'The son sent this one.' (Ælfric's Homilies Supplemental, 9:113.1350)
- (3) a. **This Jesus** hath God raysyd vp, wher of we all are witnesses. (Tyndale New Testament, 2,20A.872)  
b. **This tytle** reed many of the Iewes. (Tyndale New Testament, 19,20J.593)
- (4) **& hi** ge-cneowon manega  
and him.ACC knew many.NOM  
'And many knew him.' (West Saxon Gospels, Mk\_[WSCp]:6.33.2618)

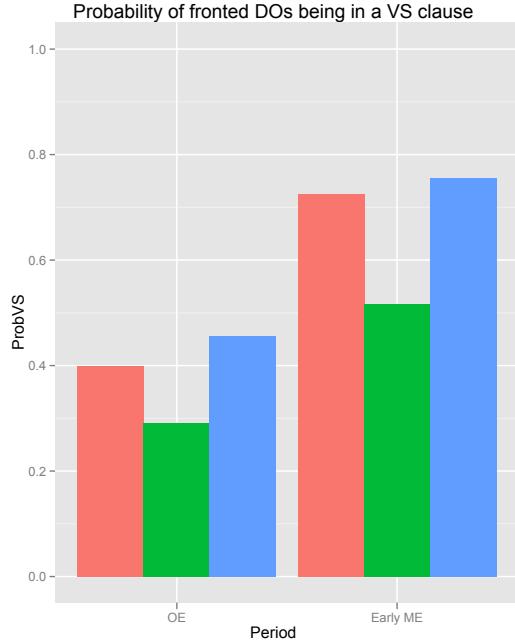


FIG. 1

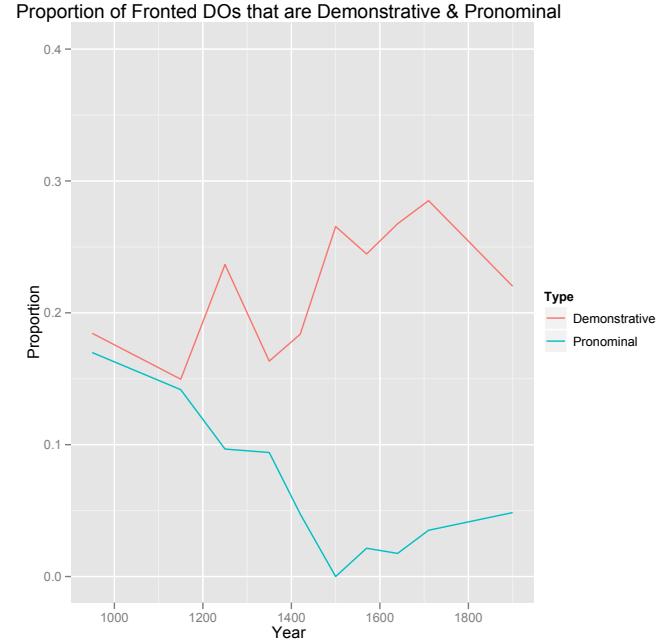


FIG. 2

	oe12	oe34	me1	me2	me3	me4	eme1	eme2	eme3	mbe
Contrastive tokens (out of 100)	36	38	44	35	37	30	31	33	39	43

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