

Word order at the clause level in Old English is a puzzling combination of the familiar and the alien: while some word orders are rather like those of the present-day language, others are very different. Closer inspection reveals that Old English word order differs in major respects from that of Modern English, and that some important changes must have taken place.

- OE was underlyingly **SOV**, as opposed to PdE, which is underlyingly **SVO**.
- OE shows a variety of word order patterns:

(1)

- a. ... **S O V** → **S V O**
 Se Hælend wearð þa geomlice ætiwed his leornung-cnihtum
 the Lord was then frequently shown his disciples-DAT
 'The Lord then frequently appeared to his disciples.'
 ÆCHom I, 15.220.21 (Fischer et al. 2000:106)
- b. ... **S O V** → **X V S O**
 Ða wæs þæt folc þæs micclan welan ungemetlice brucende ...
 then was the people the great prosperity-GEN excessively partaking
 'Then the people were partaking excessively of the great prosperity.'
 Or. 1.23.3 (Fischer et al. 2000:106)
- c. ... **S O V** → **O V S**
 Ðas ðreo ðing forgifð God his gecorenum
 these three things gives God his chosen
 'These three things God gives to his chosen'
 ÆCHom I, 18.250.12
- d. yes-no question: ... **S O V** → **V S O**
 Gemanst þu hwæt wit ær spræcon?
 care you what we-two before said
 'Do you care what we had said before?'
 Boethius 118 (HCET <R 38.118.30>)
- e. wh-question: ... **S O V** → **wh- V S O**
 Hwi wolde God swa lytles þinges him forwyrnan?
 why would God so small thing him deny
 'Why should God deny him such a small thing?'
 ÆCHom I, 1.14.2 (Fischer et al. 2000:106)
- f. negatives: ... **S O V** → **ne V S O**
 Ne recce ic hwæt hi demen;
 not care I what they think
 'I do not care what they think.'
 Boethius 121 (HCET <R 38.121.25>)

Observations to be made on the basis of the examples in (1):

- Inversion contexts in Old English, as opposed to PdE, are not restricted to auxiliaries in Old English; all finite main verbs may undergo inversion as well – not only auxiliary but all verbs can move in OE.
- If OE was SOV, then the examples in (1) allow us to conclude that the verb always moved to the second position, the so-called V-2 phenomenon cf. Modern German.

Consider the examples in (2).

(2)

- a. ... **S O V** → (**X V S O** + subject pronoun fronting =) **X S V O**
 Forðon we sceolan mid ealle mod & mægene to God gecyrran
 therefore we must with all mind and power to God turn
 'Therefore we must turn to God with all our mind and power'
 HomU19(BIHom8)26 (Fischer et al. 2000:118)
- b. ... **S O V** → (**S V O** + object pronoun fronting =) **S O V**
 God him worhte þa reaf of fellum
 God them wrought then garments of skin

‘Then God made garments of skin for them.’
ÆChom I, 1.18.18 (Fischer et al. 2000:118)

Conclusion:

- Light elements, i.e. pronominal subjects and objects tend to be fronted.

(3)

- a. subordinate clause – no verb movement

Ða com god and axode hwi he his bebod tobræce
then came God and asked why he his commandment broke

‘Then God came and asked why he had broken his commandment?’

ÆChom I, 1.18.12 (Fischer et al. 2000:115)

- Subordinate clauses **do not show verb movement** at all; it reveals the underlying **SOV**.

In sum:

- V2 in main clauses
- SOV
- light elements tend to be fronted