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PROTO-GERMANIC WORD ORDER

The purpose of this paper is the investigation of Proto-Germanic word order. To do such investigation, we needed to collect a number of texts written in the oldest Germanic languages, and to produce a tagged corpus on their basis. Due to the fact that there are no written texts in Proto-Germanic proper, we took into account texts from Old High German (OHG), Gothic and West-Saxon, as well as runic inscriptions. In order to objectivise the analysis, we chose texts whose parallel analysis in different languages would be possible. The best candidate for this analysis was the New Testament. Such procedure also allowed us to make recourse to the Vulgate and Septuagint and make further comparisons. The data that we obtained, mostly confirm the opinions generally held about Proto-Germanic word order, but there are some details that seem to say the opposite. For example, that Proto-Germanic had main clauses that were predominantly VO. Therefore, we venture to claim that Proto-Germanic was a VO language, especially if we take into account the elements V(erb) and O(bject).

1. Background

It is generally accepted that the Proto-Indo-European language (PIE) was predominantly OV in type and that its future dialects introduced some innovations with respect to word order. According to Lehmann (1972: 241/2), the early Indo-European dialects, including Proto-Germanic (PG) were OV, or at least they maintain some relics of the OV characteristics, and thus we can regard these dialects as developed from a language of an OV syntactic type. Lehmann (1972: 241) continues that since the modern Germanic languages are basically VO in type, the overall pattern of syntactic change in the Germanic branch was from an OV to a VO structure. In this development, Proto-Germanic maintains OV characteristics, but it has also taken on numerous VO features. Furthermore, early Germanic materials at one stage are ambivalent [when word order is neither VO nor OV],

a comparison. In the table below we present the data that we obtained for the behaviour of all objects, both pronominal and nominal, with respect to the verb in the parallel biblical texts that we analysed plus runic inscriptions. Moreover, we provide the table with two additional columns for the V2 and the SV2-within-V2 phenomena in order to see the possible correlations between the OV-to-VO word order change and the two phenomena; we have so far seen that at least there is a correlation between the OV-to-VO word order change and the SV2-within-V2 phenomenon.

2.1. Analysis problems

Before we make a detailed analysis of the table, however, we need to say that, as to the V2 phenomenon, one needs to treat the data with more distance than the rest of the data obtained. This mainly concerns dependent clauses. It is so because we have not got a clear definition of a dependent clause. There is no problem with a clause that has the basic sentence elements, or at least the subject (be it present physically or implied) and a finite-verb form. Moreover, when we are sure that such a clause cannot stand alone and is usually introduced by a dependent clause connector, then the situation is most likely unambiguous. The problem starts when a given clause has no finite verb form and it cannot stand alone either, because its meaning is determined by the main clause. What we mean, in fact, are clauses that have only non-finite verb forms but they may have other basic sentence elements like the object or the subject, etc. The examples below will best illustrate the problem:

1. *þa wearð zacharias gedrefed þæt geseonde and him ege onhreas*
WSCp Lk 1.12
“Then upon seeing that, Zacharias was frightened and overcome with awe”

The clause *þæt geseonde* ‘seeing that’ should be treated as a subordinate clause because it can be replaced by the clause ‘when he saw that.’ However, we did not treat the participle ‘geseonde’ as an ordinary finite verb, and thus it did not count in the analysis of the V2 phenomenon. Participles, however, sometimes occur in the first position and then follows a finite verb form, which qualifies the clause as an XV2 clause. In another example the non-finite verb form is an infinitive:

2. *and he gæð toforan him on gaste. and elias mihte. þæt he fædera heortan to heora bearnum gecyrrre. and ungeleaffulle to rihtwisra gleawscype. drihtne fullfremed folc gegearwian* WSCp Lk 1.17
“And he will go before him with the spirit and power of Elijah, in order to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous to prepare God a perfect people”

The first dependent clause in the example above is an ordinary ‘that-clause’ containing a finite-verb form in the subjunctive mood and, therefore, there is no question about its being a dependent clause. But the non-finite clause *drihtne full-fremed folc gegearwian* ‘to prepare God a perfect people’ is a dependent clause, but we did not treat the infinitive ‘gegearwian’ as an ordinary verb, and thus such clauses were not considered in the discussion of the V2 phenomenon. In yet other examples, that also did not count as regards the V2 phenomenon, the non-finite verb form is a ‘to-infinitive’ verb form. It is also some kind of a dependent clause and thus, as was the case with the above two examples, we marked it as dependent by means of the asterisk:

3. *Onlihtan þam þe on ðystrum and on deapes sceade sittað. ure fet to gercenne on sybbe weg* WSCp Lk 1.79
“To enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”
4. *& hig hyrmdon & cwædon, La Hælend Godes sunu, hwæt ys þe & us gemæne: Come þu hider ær tide us to preagenne?* WSCp Mt 8.29
“Suddenly they shouted, Son of God, what have you to do with us? Have you come here before the time to torment us?”

Although there are a substantial number of such clauses in the West-Saxon Bible, and other biblical texts that we analysed, especially in the Greek text, we classified them as dependent clauses but that did not count in the consideration of the V2 phenomenon, unless they contained a finite-verb form. Therefore, one of the direct consequences of such a procedure is that we obtained a much increased number of dependent clauses that, in turn, resulted in that the number of V2 structures in dependent clauses automatically got decreased. All this implies that the picture of the V2 phenomenon is somewhat distorted when compared with that obtained for main clauses. For example, in the West-Saxon biblical fragments that we compared with Gothic and OHG, we found 195 dependent clauses and the V2 structures constituted 36.92% of all of the investigated dependent clauses, and the SV2 structures constituted 77.77% of the total of the V2 structures. If the dependent clauses had been treated in a different way we would consequently have obtained different numbers and thus different percentages, depending on the criteria employed. However, as we have already mentioned, once the same criteria are employed for different texts to be compared, the data obtained for the individual texts are objectively comparable.

2.2. Comparison of the data

No matter what the situation with the V2 phenomenon, let us now have a look at the table below in order to see how the data for the behaviour of objects, as well

as the V2 and the SV2-within-V2 phenomena, that we have obtained for all the texts analysed, compare:

Runic Period I (RP I), Runic Period II (RP II), Runic Period III (RP III), The Vulgate (V), OHG Tatian (T), Gothic Bible (G), The Septuagint (S) and the West Saxon Bible (WSB): diachronic comparison of V2, SV2 and OV in both main and dependent clauses.

word order configurations					
main clauses					
	V2 %	SV2 %	all OV %	pron oV %	nom OV %
RP I	44.4444	68.75%	20.6896	100%	17.8571
RP II	80.3333	94.6058	3.9130	25	3.1531
RP III	77.0491	91.4893	18%	33.3333	6.8965
V	38.0116	22.3076	14.1975	4.6511	21.8390
T	46.1748	34.9112	13.4502	1.0752	24.1758
G	36.6863	20.9677	12.8205	1.1904	23.3766
S	38.6227	20.1550	12.9032	1.1904	23.75
WSB	53.6269	39.6135	28.4023	29.3478	23.9130

dependent clauses					
	V2 %	SV2 %	all OV %	pron oV %	nom OV %
RP I	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
RP II	53.6585	27.2727	73.3333	100%	63.6363
RP III	83.3333	40%	75%	100%	50%
V	39.3258	21.4285	25.4237	12.5	30%
T	52.0202	68.9320	44.6153	70%	27.0270
G	21.1764	27.7777	12%	5%	15.625
S	18.3006	32.1428	17.3913	12.5	19.3548
WSB	36.9230	77.7777	74.6478	97.1428	57.5%

If we take the runic inscriptions as texts that best reflect what was the situation with respect to word order in Proto-Germanic, then, according to the table, OE seems to be the closest to the runic inscriptions out of all of the texts that underwent our analysis; this observation at least refers to some of the areas of the

language. If we take the main clauses first, we will see that, unlike what was the situation with Gothic and OHG, in OE pronominal objects behave more or less alike when compared with the first and second period of the runic inscriptions, as around 30% of all of the pronominal objects precede the verb. Moreover, this results in that pronominal objects occur with a higher frequency before the verb than do nominal objects which means that they are more likely to occupy the position before the verb than after it. As for the behaviour of nominal objects, it can be seen that OE, OHG, and Gothic compare very well with the runic period I. It can also be seen that across the three runic periods (and also across the history of English, as will be seen later on) there is a general tendency towards the loss of the V2 structures, and at the same time there is a tendency towards the increase of the SV2-within-V2 structures. We cannot say much about the other texts with respect to that because we lack the analysis of the necessary texts that would allow us a diachronic comparison. Therefore, one of the implications here would be, as we observed before, that there is a connection between the development of the SV2-within-V2 structures and the loss of OV word order patterns. However, as to the V2 phenomenon, according to Fisher (2000: 83) 'It is worth emphasising that the phenomenon of Verb-Second is in principle independent of the order of object and verb.' As far as dependent clauses are concerned, it can be seen that OE again best reflects what was the situation in the runic periods; unfortunately, we lack the data for period one due to the fact that we found no dependent clauses in this particular period. If we take together all the objects, both nominal and pronominal, we will see that in the texts in question there are about 75% of nominal objects that go before the verb. On the other hand, if we take the behaviour of pronominal objects with respect to the verb, we will notice that up to 100% of the total of them precede the verb; in the second place is the text of OHG Tatian that has around 70% of pronominal objects occurring before the verb. As to the behaviour of nominal objects, it can be seen that in both OE and the runic periods I and II, out of the total of nominal objects, there are around 60% of them that precede the verb. In the second place, after OE, with respect to that, is OHG Tatian again, where around 30% of nominal objects go before the verb. As to the V2 and the SV2-within-V2 phenomena in dependent clauses there are no striking correspondences between the runic inscriptions and the biblical texts that we analysed. Tatian seems to be the closest to the runic inscriptions with respect to that, but the correspondence is not very striking.

3. Conclusions

On the basis of our analysis we can therefore propose the following characteristics for the Proto-Germanic word order:

in main clauses:

- it was predominantly VO
- pronominal objects occurred a lot more often before the verb than nominal objects
- there was a general tendency towards the loss of the OV patterns and an increase of the SV2-within-V2 patterns
- pronominal objects tended to stay longer before the verb than nominal objects when the language was changing towards VO

in dependent clauses:

- it was predominantly OV
- up to 100% of pronominal objects preceded the verb
- much more nominal objects preceded the verb than in main clauses
- the loss of the OV patterns was much slower than in main clauses
- nominal objects were more likely to be arranged according to the VO pattern than were pronominal objects
- there was a general tendency towards the loss of OV patterns and the increase of SV2-within-V2 patterns

What is innovative in our analysis is that Proto-Germanic main clauses were predominantly VO, which fact stands in opposition to the opinions generally expressed in the literature concerning historical linguistics. We should not, however, be surprised by the results of our analysis because the VO word order configuration is more iconic and easier to process. Moreover, it always appears in language contact situations, which testifies to the fact that it is primary and more natural.

According to Kiparsky (1995) the Proto-Indo-European was a paratactic language. Therefore, if it was a paratactic language, then it was in a less advanced syntactic stage and this, in turn, probably implies that it was basically VO. Later on, in the Proto-Germanic period, the language became more advanced from the syntactic point of view, and dependent clauses proper started to develop. Moreover, dependent clauses started to be governed by their own principles, and in consequence they were arranged differently from main clauses. For example, the inflected verb usually went towards the end of the dependent clause, which consequently resulted in OV word order patterns, whereas the main clause word order was still VO. If we assume that it is main clauses that are mostly used in a language, we could safely say that Proto-Germanic was a VO language, and in this sense its word order was a continuation of Proto-Indo-European. Afterwards, at the end of the Proto-Germanic period, and the beginning of the Old English period, dependent clauses were more and more common and they developed more and more OV word orders, which undoubtedly influenced the main clauses, and they, in turn, also started to develop OV word order configurations. However, it does not change the fact that Proto-Germanic was a VO language previous to that, especially as far as the position of the verb with respect to the object is concerned.

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Assisting websites:

Checked against Sievers (1892)
http://www.alexmidd.co.uk/Marmaria/ohg/ohg_primer_contents.htm
<http://users.belgacom.net/chardic/html/tatien.html>

checked against Wright (1990)
<http://www.wulfila.be/gothic/>

checked against : Looijenga 1997, Moltke 1985, Makaev 1996, Krause 1971, Elliot 1989
http://www.arild-hauge.com/danske_runeinnskrifter2.htm
<http://www.nordic-life.org/nmh/Krause2.htm>