Verb order, object position, and focus in Old English

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Much work in Old English (OE) syntax focuses on how to derive the variable position of objects with respect to the non-finite verb. Appeals are often made to information status (IS) in order to derive one or more of the available orders. Thus it has been claimed (Biberauer and Roberts 2005) that all post-verbal objects are necessarily focussed (i.e. both Verb-Auxiliary-Object and Auxiliary-Verb-Object orders), while pre-verbal objects (Object-Verb-Auxiliary and Auxiliary-Object-Verb orders) are not focussed. An alternative analysis (Taylor and Pintzuk 2008) similarly predicts that pre-verbal objects are not focussed, but requires post-verbal objects to be focussed only in V-Aux-O clauses; in Aux-V-O clauses, objects may or may not be focussed. These two analyses thus make different predictions about the IS of post-verbal OE objects.

In this paper we use data from the York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose to compare the distribution of non-pronominal objects in Aux-V and V-Aux clauses. In particular, we show that:

(1) post-verbal objects are more frequent in V-Aux than Aux-V clauses
(2) two factors commonly associated with focus, IS and length, affect object position in both types of clauses, but the effect is stronger in V-Aux clauses
(3) a model based primarily on IS and length fits the V-Aux data better than the Aux-V data
(4) non-referential objects, which are unlikely to be focussed, are more frequently post-verbal in Aux-V than V-Aux clauses

Although the differences between the clause types are not categorical on any dimension, in each case the V-Aux clauses show a tighter association with factors commonly associated with focus. We conclude that these data are more consistent with a theory in which there is a fundamental distinction between the derivation of object position in Aux-V and V-Aux clauses than one in which post-verbal objects have a uniform distribution based on focus.

References