

Narrative inversion in Old English prose: how (in)frequent is it?

Narrative inversion, defined as a V-initial main declarative clause with an overt subject, is considered to be an infrequent but well-attested discourse device (Walkden 2014: 94; Ringe & Taylor 2015: 408) used to introduce a new storyline or mark some sort of transition in the narrative structure of the text in numerous Germanic languages including Old English (Mitchell 1985: §3933; Los 2000; Ohkado 2004; Calle-Martín & Miranda-García 2010). Its use is quite regular in OE poetry but the structure is very unevenly distributed in the prose data, with the frequency of V-initial declaratives much higher in just a handful of OE prose texts, e.g. Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*.

Thanks to the availability of the syntactically annotated YCOE corpus of OE prose (Taylor et al. 2003), it is possible to conduct detailed quantitative and qualitative studies devoted to various syntactic structures, including narrative inversion. The quantitative approach, however, faces a serious problem of the adequate operationalisation of the structure. As it turns out in Cichosz (2022), there are two parallel constructions taking exactly the same form in the OE data, illustrated by (1) and (2):

(1) *Wæs þa sum Godes þegen binnon þære byri*
was then some God's servant in the city
'There was a servant of God in the city' (ÆCHom I, 27: 401.23-25)

(2) *Hæfde þæt deor þrie hornas on foran heafde*
had the animal three horns on forehead
'The animal had three horns on its forehead' (coalex, Alex:20.2.229)

(1) is a classic example of narrative inversion: the clause introduces a new participant and it is used at the beginning of a story. (2), however, is quite different, providing additional information about a known referent without pushing the narration forward in any way. In Cichosz (2022), which analyses samples from 4 different prose texts with the highest frequency of V1 declaratives, it turns out that narrative inversion is used by Ælfric (though not consistently in all of his works), but other prose texts opt for the construction shown in (2). Thus, it turns out that V-initial declaratives cannot be equaled with narrative inversion as at least some of them perform a drastically different discourse function. This is easily missed if only aggregate numbers are taken into account since the structures get exactly the same corpus annotation: the clause is main, non-conjunct and non-negated, the verb is past indicative, and there is an overt subject in the clause.

The aim of this study is to conduct a comprehensive qualitative analysis of all V-initial declaratives in YCOE (ca. 900 examples altogether) in order to answer the following research questions: 1) What is the actual frequency of narrative inversion in OE prose? (i.e. how many of the V1 declaratives represent construction (1)?), 2) Which OE prose texts use this narrative device and do they form a homogenous group? (linked by genre, dialect, author or subperiod), 3) Does Latin influence (notoriously responsible for the use of at least some V1 main declaratives in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, cf. Ohkado 2000 and Cichosz 2017) inflate the frequency of narrative inversion or the pattern illustrated by (2) in Bede?, and 4) Is the discourse function of narrative inversion the same in all of the prose texts which use it, and is it the same in all the OE textual records including poetry?

On a more general level, the study shows the importance of qualitative analyses, which can and should complement any data-driven corpus studies. The same form may sometimes perform different functions, which means that we deal with two separate form-meaning pairings, i.e. two different constructions in Construction Grammar sense (Goldberg 1995; Goldberg 2006), functioning as separate nodes in the language network.

References

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