Grammaticalization of Topical Elements in Middle English
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I. Introduction

It has been argued in several recent papers that languages changing from SOV to SVO pass through a stage of pragmatic syntax, where word order is determined to a high degree by constraints on the shapes of sentences as they occur in specific discourse contexts rather than by constraints defined at the level of the sentence. In particular, where word order is determined by discourse-level constraints the topic tends to occupy initial position, where topic is understood in a sense close to the Prague school conception of theme. Vennemann (1974: 355, 361, etc.), for example, claims that a stage in the transition from SXV to SVX is TVX, where topics are sentence-initial and verbs occupy second position. Lehmann (1976:455f.) argues that OV word order itself tends to be topic-prominent in the sense of Li and Thompson (1976), in which basic sentence structure consists of a sequence topic-comment, the topic having initial position. If these arguments are close to the mark then languages changing from SOV to SVO must at some point transform their pragmatic syntax into syntax governed by sentence-level constraints on the placement of grammatical relations. One way a change of this sort might be effected is by a gradual statistical change in the incidence of different word orders, such that SVO constructions become more frequent at the expense of other word order types. I will suggest that a second mechanism for bringing about the shift from pragmatic to grammatical word order may have operated in Middle English (ME): the conversion of a topical element into a subject. I will argue 1) that in ME certain nonsubjects are topical; 2) that in ME certain properties are subject and not topic properties; and 3) that the topical nonsubjects become subjects by acquiring those properties.

To find topics turning into subjects should not be surprising given the close relation between subjects and topics. One of the subject properties given by Keenan (1976:318-9) is that subjects are usually topics in basic sentences. Lehmann (450) hypothesizes that if a language came to have a requirement that matrix sentences have a grammatical subject, the topic would become the subject if there were no subject to begin with. Li and Thompson (484) argue that subjects are "grammaticalized" topics, suggesting that one would expect to find diachronic reinterpretations of topics as subjects (though I will suggest

below that the sense in which they understand topic is different from the sense in which I am using it).

II. Topical Elements

The elements that I will argue are topical in ME are the object NPs in impersonal constructions, e.g. me and þe in:

(1) Me þynk þe burde fyrst aske leue ... 'It seems to me you ought first to ask leave ...' Pearl, 316 (Gordon 1974).

Impersonal constructions in OE and ME have been discussed at length elsewhere (Gaaf 1904; McCawley 1976; Butler 1977), so I will not describe them here except to say that the dative/accusative object NPs are usually pronouns and are usually preverbal (Visser 1963:20-35). But since the term topic has been used in several different senses in recent writings on syntax, in order to argue that these object NPs are topical I must make explicit how I understand the terms topic and topical.

A. Li and Thompson have proposed a typology of languages based on whether topic or subject is the basic unit of sentence organization. In topic-prominent languages sentences may be divided into the major constituents topic-comment rather than subject-predicate. Topic-comment structures can be distinguished from subject-predicate structures by (at least) four criteria (461-4): a) Topics are always definite whereas subjects may be indefinite. An NP is definite if "I think you already know and can identify the particular referent I have in mind" (Chafe 1976:39). b) Topics need not bear a selectional relation to the verb, whereas subjects always do. c) What argument of a verb will be realized as the subject can usually be predicted, whereas it is not possible to predict what will be the topic of the sentence. d) The functional role of the topic is defined on a discourse; according to Chafe (50), topics "limit the applicability of the main predication to a certain restricted domain." The functional role of subjects, on the other hand, is defined within the sentence; subjects function as the orientation or point of view of the action or experience denoted by the predicate (Li and Thompson:464).

It is clear that if these are the criteria that distinguish topics from subjects, the objects of ME impersonal verbs are not topics. a) It is possible for impersonal objects to be indefinite, e.g.

(2) wel biþ þæm þe mot æfter deaðdage drihten secan ... 'It is well to him who may after his death seek the Lord ...' Beowulf, 186 (Visser:20).

So I cannot say that they are topic-like by this criterion. b) There does not seem to be a productive syntactic pattern in OE or ME that gives rise to sentence types containing an NP that bears no selectional relation to the verb. In particular the impersonal objects are always arguments of the impersonal verb. Most of them seem classifiable as Experiencer, e.g. me in (1). Others, as objects of verbs meaning befit, be proper, seem to fall under the categories Dative or Objective (Fillmore 1968: 25), e.g. þe in (1), or cininge in

(3) hine weorþodan swa cininge gerisep. 'they honored him as is fitting to a king.' Blickling Homilies, 69, 32. (Visser:21)

In any event, since they bear some selectional relation to the verb they are not topics by this criterion. c) What argument of the impersonal verb will be the object appears to be predictable in ME. Often the verb will have only one argument, in which case it becomes the (pronominal, preverbal) object. If an impersonal verb has more than one argument, one of them will denote a thing that happens to someone, that is allowed or fitting to someone, or that gives rise to an experience; such arguments are realized as that or infinitival clauses, or NPs in the genitive or in a prepositional phrase (Visser:23-9). The other argument will denote the person affected by the action or experience (Experiencer, Dative, Objective), and will be the surface dative/accusative NP. d) In that they provide the orientation or point of view of the experience denoted by the verb, the impersonal objects function like subjects rather than topics.

The pronominal objects of impersonal verbs, then, look more like subjects than like the topics characteristic of topic-prominent languages. But there are two reasons for not calling them subjects in OE and earlier ME. First, they lack the grammatical properties that unimpeachable subjects invariably have in OE, namely verb agreement and nominative case. Second, the subsequent development of impersonal constructions shows that throughout earlier ME the pronominal objects were not subjects. The impersonal constructions disappeared in late ME along two avenues: either the preverbal object was changed into a nominative form controlling agreement, or the object was moved to a position following the verb, the normal position for objects in an SVO language, and subject position was filled by nonreferential it. If the object pronouns were already subjects then there would have been no reason to introduce it to fill subject position, and this latter development is inexplicable.

B. Along different lines, the topic of a sentence can be conceived as being simply what the sentence is about. Topic is given this sense in, e.g., Keenan (1976: 318). This view enables us to identify the topic as something which is conceptually distinct from but usually coincident with the subject, and which is more closely associated with the verb than is Li and Thompson's topic. The problem with conceiving of topic in this way is that it defines topic at the level of the sentence and thereby deprives topic of its usefulness as a discourse concept. This sense of topic is, in fact, virtually identical to Chafe's definition of subject (43). If we assert that some cross-linguistic principle determines that topics tend to occur early in the sentence, one of the things we are trying to explain is the occurrence of sentences like

(4) There was once a King who had an illness ... He had three sons who were much distressed about it ... The Water of Life (Grimm 1972:449).

In this sentence, at the beginning of a discourse an indefinite, non-given subject is shunted to the end of the clause by means of a special existential construction like there was (what Hetzron 1975 calls a presentative movement). If we say that NPs become topics only when they are given in the discourse, we can use the notion topic to suggest a reason why constructions like this should occur: while topics tend to be sentence-initial, the preferred position for NPs that are not yet topics is farther toward the end of the clause. But if the topic of a sentence is "what the sentence is about", then a King is already a topic in the first clause in (4), and we can't use the notion topic to distinguish the subject of the first clause (a King) from the subjects of subsequent sentences (he).

C. We can overcome this difficulty by defining topic as what a discourse is about, following Kantor (1976: 172f.). When first introduced in a discourse an NP (or more precisely, its referent) is only a potential topic. To be topical it must be referred to again in adjacent or near-adjacent subsequent discourse. A topical NP is one that is sufficiently "defined and described" and "relevant" in a particular discourse context that it can be referred to and commented on with no feeling of inappropriateness (cp. Kantor:173). Whatever else they must be, NPs must be at least given (Chafe:31ff.) in order to be topical. If we conceive of topics as necessarily given then sentences like (4) do not pose a problem. The conception adopted here is very much like the Prague school notions of theme, lowest communicative dynamism, and

psychological subject (e.g. Firbas 1966:270).

Having given a partial definition of topical, it remains for me to show that the impersonal objects are topical in ME. First, Givón (1976:152f.) has argued that some NPs are more likely to be topical than others, and he isolates four hierarchical relations that state what NPs are most often topical. The impersonal objects appear to rank high on several of these hierarchies. I will not talk about the second of his relations, which states that definites are more likely to be topics than indefinites. I don't know how likely the objects are to be indefinite, but as pointed out in II.A., it is possible for them to be indefinite. Givón's other three hierarchies are: a) Human NPs are more often topical than non-human. The impersonal objects are almost always human, as a glance through Visser's examples will demonstrate. They usually denote the person affected by a psychological predicate, or a predicate denoting a nonvolitional action or event (following McCawley 1976:194). b) The more involved participant is more likely to be topical than the less involved participant. Many impersonal constructions contain only one argument, the impersonal object. As already noted, in those that contain two arguments, the second argument is realized as a that or infinitival clause, or as an NP in the genitive or in a prepositional phrase:

(5) Genitive NP: hine (acc.) nanes ðinges (gen.) ne lyste on ðisse worulde ... 'nothing in this world pleased him ...' Aelfred, Boethius, 102, 9-10 (Sedgefield 1899)

(6) That clause: hie forscamige ðæt hie eft swa don. '(that) it make them very ashamed that they do it again.' Aelfred, Cura Pastoralis, 151, 17 (Visser:25)

(7) Infinitival clause: Þa ne onhagode him to cumenne to wiðermale ongean ðone cyng ... 'Then it didn't please him to come in defense against the king ...' OE Chronicle, D1052 (Visser:29).

These arguments appear to refer to something that gives rise to a psychological state affecting someone, or something that happens to someone, or something allowed to or befitting someone. In each case the more involved participant is the dative/accusative pronoun denoting the person affected. c) First person NPs are more often topical than second person, and second person NPs more often than third person. We don't, of course, know what sorts of NPs were most common as objects of impersonals in spoken ME; but McCawley has argued that third person NPs are more likely to occur in this position in written texts than in the

spoken language: "I do not think people were talking about some 3rd person's hunger and thirst all the time" (198). If Givón's hierarchies are correct, then the fact that the impersonal objects rank high on them means that it is at least plausible to suppose that the objects were usually topical.

Second, the pronominal objects are most often found in clause-initial position, preceding the verb. While this is not the usual position for objects in later ME, it is the preferred position for topical elements. If there is a purely syntactic rule that states where in the clause the objects will be found, it is not a simple or obvious rule. The objects are not always clause-initial; when the clause begins with an adverb like þa 'then' or oft 'often' they usually move to the right of the verb, as do subjects, and sometimes they follow the verb even without initial adverbials:

(8) þa getweode hyne on hys mode ... 'then he doubted in his mind ...' OE Martyriology, 220, 2 (Visser:21)

(9) Getweonode hi hwæder ... 'It seemed doubtful to them whether ...' Aelfred, Orosius, 1, 14 (Visser:21).

Even when they are clause-initial they are not always immediately preverbal; often other elements come between object and verb:

(10) þa him æt þære byrig ne gespeow ... 'When it did not profit him at that town ...' Aelfred, Orosius, 166, 33 (Visser:21).

So we cannot say that the objects are proclitics to the verb. This clause-initial position of pronominal impersonal objects seems to be a remnant of the Proto-Germanic tendency for pronouns generally to cluster toward the beginning of their clauses (Hopper 1975:32f.). Thus in OE it is quite common to find nonsubject pronouns occurring clause-initially even in clauses containing an overt subject:

(11) Forþon þe þe is swa micel unrotnes nu get getenge ... 'But because so much unhappiness is yet now oppressing you ...' (the second þe is the 2sg. dat. pronoun) Aelfred, Boethius, 12, 3-4. (Sedgefield 1899)

(12) Me ablendan þas ungetreowan worulds æl þa ... 'Perfidious worldly riches blinded me ...' Ibid., 8, 9.

This tendency in Proto-Germanic may itself reflect the fact that intersentential pronouns, at least, generally pick up something in previous discourse, and will therefore tend to be topical.

Finally, if we accept the proposal that the impersonal objects were topical, then several puzzling facts about the later development of impersonal verbs seem less problematic. In later ME SVO order was becoming a more rigid requirement in most types of clauses. Yet well into ME the objects in impersonal constructions remained very often preverbal. Why didn't these objects move to the right of the verb like most other objects in the language? If they were topical then there would have been pragmatic pressure to keep them in clause-initial position. Of course, why they were slower to conform to SVO than other pronominal objects remains to be explained. As ME progressed toward SVO, some impersonal verbs came to take a nonreferential *it* as subject, with the objects moving to postverbal position. This *it* appeared presumably to provide a subject to fill clause-initial position. Why didn't all impersonal verbs fill the subject slot with a nonreferential *it*? If the impersonal objects were topical then they would tend to stay in clause-initial position.

III. Subject Properties

In part IV. I will argue that these topical nonsubjects became subjects by acquiring nominative case and verb agreement. That argument rests on the assumption that nominative case and verb agreement are subject properties and not topic properties. This is not necessarily a trivial thing to assume. Li and Thompson assert that verb agreement is a subject property (464-5). Givón, on the other hand, argues that when agreement arises in a language, it is the topic that the verbs agree with; agreement with subjects comes about if the topics are reanalyzed as subjects (151). In order to prove that nominative case and verb agreement are subject properties in OE and ME I would have to isolate a large group of identifiable subjects and show that case and agreement always go with them. But it seems impossible to identify subjects consistently in OE and ME without referring to case and agreement. I am in the position therefore of having to assert that nominative case and verb agreement are subject properties. What I can show is that in many sentences in OE the most topical element doesn't have these properties and the NP that has them is not topical. (12) is a case in point. *Me* appears to be topical; not only can it be assumed to be shared in the consciousness of both speaker and hearer (one of the ways an NP can be *given*; Chafe:31) but it is mentioned in immediately preceding discourse: the immediately preceding clause is

(13) ac ic nu wepende 7 gisciende ofgeradra worda misfo. 'but I now weeping and sobbing fail to find simple words.' Aelfred, Boethius, 8, 8-9.

The NP in (12) that is nominative and controls agreement is þas ungetreowan woruldsælþa, which in this sentence is being mentioned for the first time. Many similar examples could be produced. This will have to do as an argument that in OE nominative case and agreement characterize subjects and not topics.

There is some interesting data that makes it appear that some topical nonsubjects take nominative case. I am referring to "anacoluthic" constructions (Visser:61) which begin with an NP in the nominative case, but follow it with a sentence containing some other subject. This following sentence contains a nonsubject anaphor referring to the initial nominative NP, as

(14) se, seðe ... ær worolde ricsode on heofonum ... Iudeas ... woldon hine don to cyninge. 'He who reigned in heaven before the world was ... the Jews wished to make him king.' Ælfred, Cura Pastoralis, 33, 12 (Visser omits hine, which is found in the original).

These are something like topic-comment structures in form, with the topic marked with the nominative case. They seem to be left dislocations, and the initial NPs correspond closely to Chafe's notion of "premature subjects" (51-2). They occur in all stages of English and are the only exceptions I am aware of to the claim that in OE and ME nominative case marks subjects and not topics. These anacoluthic sentences are not just like Li and Thompson's topic-comment structures. Topics in topic-comment structures are generally syntactically independent of the verb, whereas in every anacoluthic sentence cited by Visser the initial nominatives anticipate some anaphor that is part of the case frame of the verb.

IV. Grammaticalization

In later ME impersonal constructions disappeared almost completely. They were replaced by constructions containing a nonreferential it subject, me semeth > it seems to me, or by constructions in which the preverbal object has given way to a subject, me nedeth > I need. The latter of these two replacements shows a form with nominative case and verb agreement in place of an earlier form lacking these subject properties. One way to interpret this change is: subject properties were attached to the former topical nonsubjects. Evidence for this interpretation is provided by examples like the following, where the

preverbal NP has nominative case or verb agreement, but not both (Visser 1963 and Gaaf 1904, cited in Butler 1977):

Agreement without case:
(15) Me-seem my head doth swim. Damon and Pythias, 79. 1571.
(16) Me-think it nott necessary so to do. Plumpton Correspondence, 30. 1475.
Case without agreement:
(17) Do as ye (nom.) seems (3sg.) best. Generydes, 6007. c1430.
(18) Now may ye sey what ye semeth (3sg.) ... Merlin, 85, 4-5. c1450.

In these examples the subject properties seem to have been imparted to the object pronouns one by one. I would argue, then, that the transition from impersonal to personal constructions can be explained in part as a process in which a topical nonsubject is grammaticalized to subject.

V. Related Phenomena

Kossuth (1976) cites evidence from Icelandic in which the preverbal pronoun of an impersonal construction has acquired a property that has been considered to be strictly a subject property. In Old Icelandic, and normally also in Modern Icelandic, the reflexive possessive pronoun sinn is controllable only by subjects (Kossuth 1976:15; Einarsson 1945:124). Kossuth reports that sinn may now be controlled by the preverbal dative/accusative pronouns of impersonal verbs (Kossuth:15):

(19) Honum (dat.) likar vel við frænda sinn. 'He likes his cousin well.'
(20) Hann (acc.) vantar bókina sina. 'He is lacking his book.'

These sentences constitute further examples of the transfer of subject properties to an impersonal object, in a language that is at an intermediate stage in the transition from SOV to SVO (Kossuth:8ff.). Whether these objects can be shown to be topical, as I have tried to show their ME counterparts to be, is not clear to me. Kossuth argues that they occur in initial position for syntactic rather than pragmatic reasons.

In OE, Patient/Goal arguments that were marked as datives on the surface could not be advanced to subject by Passive (Traugott 1972:82). This fact is reflected in the "impersonal passive" construction. In impersonal passives the verb has no accusative argument, but only a

Patient or Goal in the dative; this verb assumes passive form, but nothing is advanced to subject (Visser:2112):

(21) Ac ðæm (dat.) mæg beon suiðe hraðe geholpen from his lareowe ... 'But to him may be very quickly helped by his teacher ...' Ælfred, Cura Pastoralis, 225, 22.

In ME the domain of Passive was extended such that these dative NPs could become subjects. One possible explanation for this change in Passive might be that as ME word order became more rigidly SVO, topical elements had to be advanced to subject if they were to be clause-initial. If this conjecture turns out to be correct then the extention of Passive is a second phenomenon related to the grammaticalization of ME impersonal objects: both processes represent adjustments of the syntax in response to word order constraints that place restrictions on how universal principles of discourse may be expressed.

VI. Conclusion

Most of the data I have looked at here is well-known. I have argued elsewhere that the sentences in part IV show that the impersonal objects were being reanalyzed as subjects in later ME (Butler 1977). In this paper I have tried to argue 1) that the impersonal objects were often topical, in a sense I tried to make clear, and 2) that there may be a connection between their topicality and the way they developed in later ME, in particular the way they yielded to constructions that contained subjects.

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