

July 11 [July 4], 2003

CLASS 7: Syntactic Features of Middle English

Impersonal Constructions

These are constructions whose subject is “**pleonastic**” (or **dummy, meaningless, expletive**) *it* or *there* in NE, which didn’t exist at all in OE (see Class 3), such as:

(1) It so happened that they came to a town. [NE]

In ME these pronouns were quite often left out:

(2) And happed so, they coomen in a toun. [ME]

“**Weather-*it***” (another kind of expletive) was more frequently included:

(3) Now it shyneth, now it reyneth faste. [ME]

“Dropping” these pronouns, as in (2), is perhaps linked to the **verb-second rule** (Modern Dutch and German have the same rule and allow these pronouns to be dropped in verb-second clauses).

Psychological Predicates

Psychological predicates are predicates expressing **emotion or psychological state**. These involve **two semantic roles**: *Cause* and *Experiencer*. In most languages there are **three types**:

(4) Type I: Norbert likes bagels.	<i>subject = experiencer; direct object = cause</i>
Type II: Bagels please Norbert.	<i>subject = cause; direct object = experiencer</i>
Type III: Bagels appeal to Norbert.	<i>subject = cause; indirect object = experiencer</i>

In ME, **many former Type III-psych verbs turn into Type I**, e.g.:

(5) Pam cyninge licodon peran. [OE]
the king.DAT liked.PL pears.NOM
‘Pears liked [appealed] to the king.’

Pam cyninge is an **indirect object** in first (pre-verbal) position here, *not* the subject. Owing to **SVO replacing V2** order and the **loss of dative** case to mark indirect objects, (5) turns into (6):

(6) The king liked pears. [ME]

Psychological verbs can also have **sentential complements**. Type II-verbs have **dummy *it*** as the subject of the clause and the **sentence (i.e. the sentential complement) last**:

(7) It seems to John [that the world is round]. [NE]

In OE and ME, the ***to*-phrase was a dative** and thanks to V2 could come first. So we could have:

(8) Me.DAT seems that... [OE/ME]

Some old Type III-verbs were **reanalyzed as Type I** in ME, e.g. *think* (cf. German *dünken*). This is the origin of Shakespearean ***methinks*** (which by then was a fossilized relic of the old Type II).

Modal Verbs

Modal verbs express notions like **possibility, necessity, obligation, permission**. In **NE**, there is a small group of these which has very **special** characteristics: *can, could, must, may, might, shall, should, will, would, ought*. In **ME**, these were much more like **ordinary verbs** (change in **ENE**).

In ME we find that the modals had **transitive uses** (i.e. they could have their own subject):

(9) She **koude** muchel of wandrynge by the weye. [ME]
'She could [= knew] much of wandering by the day.'

(10) And by that feith that I **shal** Priam of Troye. [ME]
'And by that faith that I shall (= owe) Priam of Troy.'

(11) And seyde he **moste** unto Italye. [ME]
'And said he must (= go) to Italy.'

The modal verbs also had non-finite forms, which they no longer do:

(12) Patt mannkinn **sholde muzhenn** wel /Upp commen inntill heoffne. [ME]
that mankind should may (= be able to) well up come to heaven

(13) But Pandarus, if godly hadde he **myght**... [ME]
but Pandarus if godly had he might (= been able to)

These possibilities disappear in the 16th century from Standard English, although they survive in some dialects (and they're also available in German).

Ginnen

Ginnen was a much-used verb which has completely died out. It is unclear what it really meant. Sometimes it corresponds to *beginnen* (an *inchoative*):

(14) Seppen þat ich here regni **gan**... [ME]
since that I here (to) reign began

But it can't always have this interpretation, given the context:

(15) Pus þe bataile **gan** late long [ME]
Till þe time of evensong

(16) A knaue he **gan** imete. [ME]

Do

At the time, *do* wasn't an interrogative/negative auxiliary as it is today. It had a *causative* use (like NE *let* or *make*):

(17) Þe king **dede** þe mayden arise. [ME]
the king did (=made) the maiden arise

(18) A noble churche heo **dude** a-rere. [ME]
a noble church he did (= made) raise

We also find **sequences of do**, where the second is causative but not the first (probably):

(19) Þe treasurer **dyde do make** a ditch [ME]
the treasurer did (?) do make (someone) a ditch

(20) ... and so thus he **ded lete make** ... lettirs [ME]
and so thus he did (?) let make (someone) letters

The “**dummy**” *do* in (19) and (20) — (“?”) — is probably the origin of the NE auxiliary.

Negation

There are **two main ways** that different languages can form negation:

(21) neg V (*neg* is almost a prefix)

(22) NEG V (*NEG* is like an adverb)

These two ways can **combine**, most famously in French (cf. Welsh: *nid...ddim*):

(23) Jean **n'aime pas** Marie.
Jean neg.likes NEG Marie
'Jean doesn't like Marie.'

The **Negative Cycle** (Jespersen 1917):

(24) a. neg V ⇒ *reinforced by a phonetically “stronger” negative adverb*
b. neg V NEG ⇒ *neg drops out due to redundancy*
c. V NEG ⇒ *NEG gets reduced, and the whole thing starts again*

(25) Ac hie **ne** dorston þær on cumin [OE]
and they neg dared there on come.INF
'And they didn't dare to come there.'

(26) amonges these thynges I **ne** trowe **nat** [ME]
among these things I neg believe NEG

na(h)t < *nanewuht* 'nought/nothing'

Verb Second

This is the rule that says that the inflected verb must come after exactly one constituent in main clauses. This rule, in slightly varying forms, is found in **all the Germanic languages** except NE. It was also found in **OE and ME**, and dies out in **late ME** (LME/Chaucer ≠ ENE/Shakespeare).

Different kinds of V2:

(27) Subj V *looks like NE (cf. (17), (19) etc. above)*

(28) Obj V ***so moche water þei wepte...** (disregard weak pronoun)*

(29) Adv V ***scarsly shaltou fynden any person...***

(30) Neg V ***nevere gronte he at no strook but oon***

97% of subordinate clauses in ME have SV order (i.e. are not V2), but only 67% of main clauses. If the first constituent is negative or an indirect object, VS is obligatory. 57% of VS clauses begin with an adverb (Palmatier 1969, reported in Crystal 1995).

References

Crystal, David. 1995. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. Cambridge: CUP.
Jespersen, Otto. 1917. *Negation in English and Other Languages*. Copenhagen: A.F. Host.
Palmatier, Robert A. 1969. *A Descriptive Syntax of the Ormulum*. The Hague: Mouton.

Reading

📖 Barber 1993: ch. 8 — 📖 Pyles & Algeo 1982: ch. 7