COMPLEX SENTENCES IN OLD ENGLISH

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Compound and complex sentences existed in the English language since the earliest times. Even in the oldest texts we find numerous instances of coordination and subordination and a large inventory of subordinate clauses, subject clauses, object clauses, attributive clauses, adverbial clauses.

Subject clauses are not often found in OE texts, predicative clauses do not seem to occur in OE texts, object clauses are mainly found in indirect speech, that is, in connection with verbs meaning 'say', 'announce', 'ask', 'think', and the like. They may be introduced by the conjunction *þæt*, by an interrogative pronoun or adverb, or, occasionally, be joined on asyndetically. As for attributive clauses they are introduced either by the relative pronoun *þe* or by the pronoun sē. Adverbial clauses cover a wide variety of meanings, such as place, time, cause, purpose, concession, comparison, etc. Accordingly the number of conjunctions introducing such clauses is considerable. Here we find *þā* 'when', *þonne* 'when', *oþþæt* 'until', *for* 'because' and others.

And yet many constructions – especially in early original prose – look clumsy, loosely connected, disorderly and wanting precision, which is natural in a language whose written form had only begun to grow.

Once it has been established that a sequence of clauses makes up a complex sentence, the question arises whether the clauses are in a paratactic or hypotactic relations, that is, whether the clauses are linked as equals or asymmetrically, cf. *He went jogging and then left for work* (paratactic) vs. *After he went jogging he went to work.* (hypotactic). Parataxis is traditionally subdivided into two types. One type, called 'asyndetic', has no overt conjunctions. Typical examples are: *I came, I conquered*, where no co-ordinating conjunctions are present. The second type of parataxis, called 'syndetic', is characterized by overt co-ordinating conjunctions, as in *I came and I conquered*.

It is sometimes said that OE syntax, at least in the earlier poetry, was characteristically paratactic. But the evidence of extant documents, allowing for

different style and genre, and different conventions about literacy, suggests that the structure of OE allowed for a great variety of types of hypotaxis. One factor that makes OE seem more paratactic is the greater frequency in formal writing of unco-ordinated and co-ordinated sentences.

Complex sentences consist of two or more clauses conjoined. In OE, as in PDE, there are a lot of complex sentence types. They are: co-ordinate, relative, purposive, result, causal, conditional, concessive, temporal and comparative. The complex clause types of OE are roughly equivalent to PDE co-ordinate and subordinate clauses with similar names. However, in some cases evidence for syntactic as opposed to semantic subordination is not as apparent as in PDE. In PDE there is often a morphological difference between adverbs and conjunctions. It is therefore in most cases possible to tell from form as well as meaning whether a clause is introduced by an adverb or a conjunction, cf. *afterwards* vs. *after*, *therefore* vs. *because*. However, in OE most such pairs are homonymous (with the connective derived from the adverb), cf. *æfter* 'afterwards, after', *for þon* 'therefore, because', *þa*, *þonne* 'then, when', *þær* 'there, where', *swa* 'so, as'. The main exception is the pair *gif ... þonne* 'if … then' (as is true in the case of the PDE reflex *if ... then, þonne* cannot occur alone without *gif* as the marker of a conditional construction). Usually the context invites unambiguous interpretation of a sequence of clauses as a sequence of independent sentences or as connected in a complex sentence. Ambiguities nevertheless do exist, as in;

Nu hæbbe we awriten þære Asian suþdæl,/;

Now have we described that Asia's southern-part,/;

nu wille we fon to hire norðdæle

now will we turn to its northern-part

Historical syntax has been studied to a much smaller extend than either phonetics, lexicology or morphology. Though the main trends in the development of syntactic structure appear to be clear, many more detailed investigations have yet to be made to complete the picture.

References

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