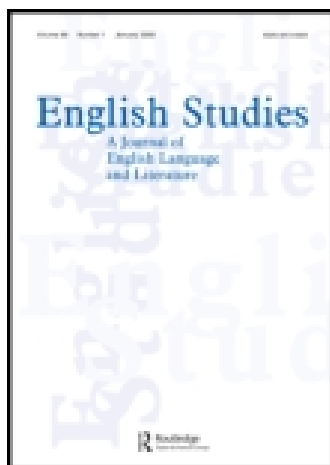


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# Empty Referential Subjects in Old English Prose: A Quantitative Analysis

Kristian A. Rusten

*As Present-Day English with but a few exceptions requires fully overt referential subject pronouns in finite clause structures, the occurrence of empty referential pronominal subjects at the Old English stage of the language is notable and intriguing. While many have commented on the presence of such empty subjects in Old English, there exists very little systematic empirical research in this area of historical English syntax. The present article makes a contribution to this area by presenting an empirical survey of the occurrence of empty referential subjects in eleven Old English prose texts, along with a quantitative analysis of a number of structural variables deemed relevant for the permissibility of the phenomenon. It is shown here that empty subjects occur much less frequently than suggested by previous research. I therefore argue that previous accounts have overestimated the “idiomaticity” of this phenomenon in Old English. I also reject the hypothesis that subject pronouns can be realised as empty only in cases where the referent of the omitted pronoun is easily recoverable, whether through verbal inflections or discourse prominence.*

## 1. Introduction

This article is concerned with empty referential pronominal subjects in Old English (OE) prose.<sup>1</sup> It compares the total occurrences of empty and overt referential subject pronouns in eleven OE prose texts and investigates the role in sanctioning the phenomenon played by various syntactic criteria suggested by previous research. The article thus contributes an analysis of empirical data to a severely understudied area of OE syntax. It will be shown that the analysed empty subjects—here classified into three distinct groups—are much more restricted in distribution than previously assumed. On this basis, I raise the question of whether it actually is true that empty subjects are a sanctioned part of OE grammar, as some have claimed.<sup>2</sup> Further, I provide empirical

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<sup>1</sup>The article is based on my unpublished 2010 MA thesis (Rusten), which was a corpus-based quantitative investigation of the occurrence of empty subjects in OE prose.

<sup>2</sup>See section 2.

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documentation that empty subjects most frequently occur in second conjunct clauses and most often share reference with a subject occurring in the preceding context.<sup>3</sup> As very few instances of empty subjects actually are present in the investigated texts, proposing a unified theory explaining the occurrences is difficult, yet I suggest that at least some may represent remnants of an antiquated Germanic grammar. I reject the hypothesis that subject pronouns can be realised as empty only in cases where the referent is easily recoverable, whether through verbal inflections or discourse prominence.

## 2. Background

The fact that OE features empty referential pronominal subjects occurring with apparent regularity has been thoroughly established at least since the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

Such empty subjects correspond in many cases to the much-discussed *pro*-drop of generative syntax, a feature that is in marked contradiction to the situation in Present-Day English (PDE), where most finite structures require subject pronouns to be realised overtly.<sup>5</sup> It is a long-established fact that OE is not alone among the Old Germanic languages in featuring such empty subjects, a fact pointing towards the conclusion that these languages must have evolved from a stage of development where empty referential pronominal subjects were a sanctioned linguistic feature.<sup>6</sup> At present, such realisations have become ungrammatical in the vast majority of contexts.<sup>7</sup> An example of an OE “subjectless” clause has been provided in (1) below, where the abbreviation  $S_0$ , to be used henceforth, denotes an empty referential subject:

- (1)  $[S_0]$  *Wearð þa fordrifen on an iġlond ut on ðære Wendelsæ.*  
 [he] became then away-driven to an island out in the Mediterranean-sea  
 “He was then driven to an island in the Mediterranean.”  
 (Bo 115.22)<sup>8</sup>

While the occurrence of  $S_0$  in e.g. Gothic, Old High German (OHG) and Old Norse (ON) has been quite well documented,<sup>9</sup> the same is not true for OE, where, to the best of my knowledge, no in-depth systematic empirical research has yet been carried out.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Note, however, that empty coordinated subjects of the variety still permissible in Present-Day English are excluded from the scope of the study, as my main interest was quantifying those instances of empty subjects that are incompatible with the rules of the modern language. See section 3 for details and examples.

<sup>4</sup>See e.g. Baker; Mitchell; Pogatscher; Traugott; van Gelderen; Visser.

<sup>5</sup>See section 3 for exceptions and examples.

<sup>6</sup>See e.g. Fertig; Pogatscher.

<sup>7</sup>That being said, Axel (37) states that a certain degree of *pro*-drop may be observed in some Modern German dialects. Limited contextual *pro*-drop may likewise also occur in other Modern Germanic languages. No such dialects or languages were investigated in this study.

<sup>8</sup>Sedgefield, 115.

<sup>9</sup>See e.g. Axel; Eggenberger; Fertig; Kraus; Pogatscher; Sigurðsson; Sonderegger; Streitberg.

<sup>10</sup>At the time of acceptance of this article (December 2011), I was unaware of the work by Walkden, which was then in preparation. Walkden, *Syntactic Reconstruction and Proto-Germanic*, ch. 5, provides a detailed, cross-linguistic examination of empty referential subjects in a number of Old Germanic languages. His findings on OE are

The most extensive account is to be found in Pogatscher, yet this philological work is mainly concerned with citing examples of clauses featuring  $S_0$  while suggesting an overview of the syntactic environments in which such pronouns could occur. The empirical data provided are not systematised and thus the value of the investigation to the modern linguist is somewhat limited.

Despite this lack of quantitative data, numerous claims regarding the distribution and extent of the phenomenon have been made over the years. Traugott, for instance, claims that “[a] grammatical subject is not obligatory in OE”,<sup>11</sup> while Baker states that “the Old English finite verb can sometimes express the subject all by itself” in situations where PDE requires a pronominal subject.<sup>12</sup> Mitchell states that the occurrence of empty subjects is an “idiomatic” feature of OE, even though they occur only “spasmodically”.<sup>13</sup> While Pogatscher claims that “im Altenglischen nicht bloss im hauptsondern auch im nebensatze das subjekt unausgedrückt bleiben kann” [“in Old English, the subject can be unexpressed not only in main clauses, but also in subordinate clauses”], Visser emphasises that “use of the subject pronoun was the rule”.<sup>14</sup> Van Gelderen disagrees radically with this view, however, claiming that “pro-drop is quite common” and occurs “regularly” in OE.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to widely differing accounts of the distribution of  $S_0$  in OE, opinions are also highly divergent as regards the role of the verbal morphology in permitting empty subjects. Even from a very early stage, the occurrence of this phenomenon has been linked to the ability of an inflected finite verb to identify the subject’s referent. Ohlander claims that an overt subject pronoun in many cases is redundant, as “the subject was generally sufficiently indicated by the personal ending of the predicate verb”.<sup>16</sup> Mitchell objects to this, on the grounds that the OE verbal inflections are “too ambiguous” to serve this function.<sup>17</sup> This view is also reflected by Visser, who states that overt subjects constitute the predominant variant, due to “extensive formal syncretism [in the verbal morphology]”.<sup>18</sup> Van Gelderen disagrees again, asserting that empty subjects are “common” in OE as a consequence of “the strength of the verbal person features”.<sup>19</sup>

It should thus be sufficiently illustrated that no consensus has been reached as concerns the actual distribution and frequency of  $S_0$  in OE or what it is that permits the phenomenon. Even so, an apparently impressionistic notion that empty subjects are more or less commonly observed in OE has persisted for decades. With this in mind, I aim here to

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also presented in Walkden, “Null Subjects in Old English”. A number of these findings coincide independently with those to be presented in this article. See Walkden, “Null Subjects in Old English” (175, fn. 20).

<sup>11</sup>Traugott, 170.

<sup>12</sup>Baker, 105.

<sup>13</sup>Mitchell, 633

<sup>14</sup>Pogatscher, 261; Visser, 4.

<sup>15</sup>Van Gelderen, 121, 149.

<sup>16</sup>Ohlander, 107.

<sup>17</sup>Mitchell, 628

<sup>18</sup>Visser, 4.

<sup>19</sup>Van Gelderen, 121, 149

empirically quantify the frequency and distribution of this phenomenon. I also attempt to determine whether any degree of systematicity can be observed with regard to the syntactic—and to some extent, pragmatic—characteristics of the investigated empty subjects. Considerable focus is also directed toward the process of identifying the antecedent of the empty subject, as the ease or difficulty here is hypothesised to influence the permissibility of omission of referential subject pronouns.<sup>20</sup>

To the best of my knowledge, then, the work presented here is the first large-scale investigation of empty referential pronominal subjects in OE.<sup>21</sup> While my results have not been formalised in terms of any specific theoretical framework, I believe that the data collected and analysed in this study are of considerable general relevance to the OE research community. In the present study, then, I attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do empty referential pronominal subjects occur in the selected corpus of OE prose texts?
2. To what extent is the occurrence of empty referential pronominal subjects sanctioned by syntactic and pragmatic criteria such as the type of clause in which the empty pronoun occurs, the grammatical function of its antecedent, the type of clause in which the antecedent occurs and the textual “distance” separating it from the empty subject?<sup>22</sup>

The article is structured in the following manner: section 3 presents the scope of the study; section 4 describes the analysed data material and the methodology employed; section 5 provides an overview of the relative distribution of  $S_o$  in OE; section 6 details the various types of  $S_o$  identified; and section 7 presents and discusses the various characteristics associated with  $S_o$  and its antecedent. Finally, section 8 discusses the long-established notion that empty subjects are permissible as long as the reference of the empty pronoun is easily recoverable, and also presents problems involved in identifying the antecedent.

### 3. Scope of the Study

While most finite clause structures in PDE do not allow empty referential subjects, there are a few that do. The present study, however, concerns itself exclusively with such instances of empty subjects as are considered incompatible with the rules of the modern language, excluding from its scope parallel occurrences to those that are still a grammatical feature of English. Thus, the present study does not consider

<sup>20</sup>The term *antecedent* is here understood as the last iteration of the expression co-referent with the empty subject prior to the clause containing said subject.

<sup>21</sup>See footnote 10.

<sup>22</sup>These criteria, proposed by previous research, form the focal points of a substantial quantitative analysis of a number of structural variables claimed to be relevant for the occurrence of  $S_o$ .

relevant structures where pronominal subjects occurring in the second member of a coordinated clause structure<sup>23</sup> are omitted under co-reference with the subject of the first member of the coordinated pair.<sup>24</sup> The distinction between such structures and the instances of empty subjects occurring in second conjunct clauses considered relevant here is illustrated in (2) and (3), respectively.

- (2) *Ða aras Iosep of swefene & dyde swa Drihtnes engel him bebead*  
 then rose Joseph from sleep and did as Lord's angel him commanded  
 "Then Joseph rose from his sleep, and did as the Lord's angel  
 commanded him."  
 (WSCp Mt 1.24)<sup>25</sup>
- (3) *Forðæm hit is neah þære tide þe ic getiohhod hæfde on oðer weorc to fonne,*  
 because it is near the time which I intended had on other work to do  
*& get næbbe [S<sub>o</sub>] þis gedon;*  
 and yet not-have [I] this done  
 "Because the time is approaching when I had intended to do other work, and yet  
 have I not done this."  
 (Bo 127.26)<sup>26</sup>

As is evident, the structure in (2) is still idiomatic in PDE. That in (3) is not, however, as the empty subject of the second conjunct clause is not co-referent with the subject of the immediately preceding first conjunct clause, but rather with the subject of a preceding subordinate clause.

Empty subjects occurring in imperative main clauses are also excluded from the scope of the study, on the basis of still being permissible in PDE. An illustration is given in (4), where the similarity to modern-day imperatives should be readily apparent.

- (4) *Gyf ðu sy godes sunu: cwæð to þysum stanum þæt hie beon awende to hlafum.*  
 if you be God's son: say-IMP to these stones that they become turned to bread  
 "If you are the son of God, say to these stones that they should become bread."  
 (ÆCHom I 266.12)<sup>27</sup>

#### 4. Material and Methodology

The present study analysed all 450 occurrences of S<sub>o</sub> in a corpus of eleven OE prose texts representing both the early (eOE) and late OE (IOE) periods. It was determined

<sup>23</sup>Second conjunct clause, in the terminology employed here.

<sup>24</sup>First conjunct clause, in the terminology employed here.

<sup>25</sup>Skeat, 28.

<sup>26</sup>Sedgefield, 127.

<sup>27</sup>Clemons, 266.

that the prose tradition was more likely to provide examples of genuine OE syntax, as opposed to the poetic and gloss traditions. This is not necessarily an unproblematic decision, as poetic syntax is undoubtedly also a reflection of genuine language use, but for the present endeavour, it was deemed best to avoid the methodological issues inherent to introducing other genres than that of prose. The texts under analysis include Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (Bede)<sup>28</sup>, Boethius' *De Consolatio Philosophiae* (Bo)<sup>29</sup>, Gregory the Great's *Cura Pastoralis* (CP)<sup>30</sup> and *Dialogues* (GD)<sup>31</sup>, Orosius' *Historiarum Adversum Paganos Libri Septem* (Or)<sup>32</sup>, the West-Saxon Gospels (WSCp)<sup>33</sup>, Byrhtferth's *Manual* (ByrM)<sup>34</sup>, Manuscript A of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (ChronA)<sup>35</sup>, Alfred's *Laws* (LawAf)<sup>36</sup> and the two series of Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* (ÆCHom I and II).<sup>37</sup>

Data were collected through use of the York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose (YCOE).<sup>38</sup> Following collection, tokens were analysed and classified according to the syntactic and pragmatic criteria listed in research question 2. As suggested there, these variables included the clause type in which  $S_o$  occurs, where the distinction was between "first" or non-conjunct main clauses, second conjunct main clauses, adverbial clauses, relative clauses and *þæt*-clauses. The grammatical function of the antecedent constituted another variable, whether functioning as subject, direct or indirect object, subject complement, prepositional complement or a genitive structure. "Miscellaneous" and indefinite antecedents were also distinguished. A third variable was the clause type in which the antecedent occurs, distinguishing whether the antecedent is located in a preceding main or subordinate clause or in a following main or subordinate clause. The textual "distance" between  $S_o$  and its antecedent was measured by counting the number of individual words separating the two. Also investigated were the person and number features of the empty pronoun. In order to provide a contrastive perspective, the total instances of overt referential pronominal subjects—abbreviated  $S_{pron}$ —according to occurrence in various clause types were also collected through use of the YCOE. This made possible the juxtaposition of

<sup>28</sup>Miller.

<sup>29</sup>Sedgefield.

<sup>30</sup>Sweet.

<sup>31</sup>Hecht.

<sup>32</sup>Bately.

<sup>33</sup>Skeat.

<sup>34</sup>Baker and Lapidge.

<sup>35</sup>Plummer.

<sup>36</sup>Lieberman.

<sup>37</sup>Clemons; Godden.

<sup>38</sup>Taylor et al. The scope of the study was restricted to those occurrences of empty subjects labelled \**pro*\* by the YCOE corpus analysts. Again, this means that instances of empty coordinated subjects—labelled \**con*\* by the corpus analysts—and empty expletive subjects—labelled \**exp*\*—were not taken into account. Note, however, that some of the instances labelled \**con*\* could be of interest here, as not all of these structures seem to be acceptable in PDE. This seems to be especially true for instances of empty subjects occurring in asyndetic second conjunct clauses. I am unable to examine these instances closer at the present time, but I aim to investigate this further.



**Table 1** Pronominal Subjects in Old English Prose:  $S_{\text{pron}}$  vs  $S_{\text{o}}$ 

Texts	$S_{\text{pron}}$	$S_{\text{o}}$	
		$n$	%
<i>Bede</i>	3,948	133	3.3
Bo	3,897	26	0.7
ByrM	356	1	0.3
ChronA	363	7	1.9
CP	4,839	36	0.7
GD	5,296	15	0.3
LawAf	131	84	39.1
Or	2,303	65	2.7
WSCp	5,792	35	0.6
ÆCHom I	5,583	26	0.5
ÆCHom II	4,801	22	0.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>37,309</b>	<b>450</b>	<b>1.2</b>

instances of  $S_{\text{o}}$  and  $S_{\text{pron}}$  according to clause type, facilitating as full a degree of quantification as possible of the distribution of  $S_{\text{o}}$  in the texts under analysis.

Finally, while all collected tokens have been analysed on an equal basis, the study recognises the fact that some of the instances of  $S_{\text{o}}$  may be attributable to scribal error. This possibility is highlighted by the YCOE corpus analysts<sup>39</sup> as well as by previous studies.<sup>40</sup> However, given the considerable difficulties involved in deciding rigorously which instances, if any, are caused by scribal error, the stance was taken that the analysed occurrences of  $S_{\text{o}}$  for my purposes would be interpreted as representing genuine tokens valid for research. This outlook finds support in Mitchell, who, as recalled, refers to  $S_{\text{o}}$  as “idiomatic” in OE.<sup>41</sup>

## 5. The Relative Distribution of $S_{\text{o}}$ in Old English

In light of the lack of consensus concerning the distribution and frequency of  $S_{\text{o}}$  in OE, I found it very much of interest to quantify exactly how often this phenomenon occurs in the selected OE texts. Table 1 demonstrates the distribution of  $S_{\text{o}}$  in OE prose as represented by my corpus texts, providing a basic comparison between empty and overt pronominal subjects. The table gives the number of occurrences of overt and empty pronominal subjects in the corpus texts, as well as the relative frequency of  $S_{\text{o}}$ , expressed as a percentage of the total.

As is evident,  $S_{\text{o}}$  must be said to be a very restricted phenomenon in the texts under analysis, at an overall relative frequency of only 1.2%. This no-more-than-negligible

<sup>39</sup>Taylor.

<sup>40</sup>E.g. Allen, 57.

<sup>41</sup>Mitchell, 633.

frequency is somewhat surprising, given that various previous studies have referred to  $S_o$  in OE as being both widespread and “idiomatic”.<sup>42</sup> The results presented here are in particular contradiction to van Gelderen, who claims to have “illustrate[d] that pro-drop occurs regularly in Old English”.<sup>43</sup> Based on the figures presented above, I do not see how this can possibly be the case, as rates are very low both on average and on a text-individual basis. With exception made for Alfred’s *Laws*, whose remarkably high frequency for  $S_o$  (39.1%) is due to its high concentration of what may be described as “imperative-like” hortative subjunctive structures,<sup>44</sup> none of the texts exceed 3.3%  $S_o$ . Seven of the analysed texts feature frequencies of less than 1%. The highest frequencies except for *LawAf* are observed in the OE versions of *Bede* (3.3%) and *Or* (2.7%). Interestingly, the frequencies for *ÆCHom* I and II—both extensive texts—are identical (0.5%). Also interestingly, frequencies for  $S_o$  in the OE and OHG translation of *Boethius* are very similar, at 0.7% and 0.9%, respectively.<sup>45</sup> Such even frequencies may indicate some level of systematicity, and, although frequencies are very low, may perhaps also help corroborate the hypothesis that limited use of empty subjects was indeed a realisation of a language-feature common to early stages of the Germanic languages. It should be noted, however, that frequencies for the texts examined here are considerably lower than for the other OHG texts investigated in Eggenberger, where frequencies for  $S_o$  range between 11.2% and 88.6%.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the low frequencies for  $S_o$  in the analysed texts, I tested whether significant developments toward the loss of empty referential subjects could be said to have occurred between eOE and IOE. The study defined *Bede*, *Bo*, *ChronA*, *CP*, *LawAf* and *Or* as eOE, while *ByrM*, *GD*, *WSCp* and *ÆCHom* I and II were classified as IOE.<sup>47</sup>  $S_o$  was seen to be significantly more frequent in eOE.<sup>48</sup> However, the fact that  $S_o$  is a marginal phenomenon in both periods makes it very difficult to claim that great developments toward the loss of empty subjects have been made in the time separating them.

The main conclusion drawn here is thus that empty referential pronominal subjects in OE are much more restricted in distribution than previously assumed, regardless of period. Indeed, it may be argued that  $S_o$  is more or less extinct by the time of the extant OE texts. It follows from this that any stage of competition

<sup>42</sup>See section 2.

<sup>43</sup>Van Gelderen, 149.

<sup>44</sup>See section 6.

<sup>45</sup>Haugland (table based on Eggenberger), 86.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup>This classification should be largely unproblematic. A comment on *ChronA* and *GD* is warranted, however. In the case of *ChronA*, I followed Haugland, who defines entries preceding 950 CE as eOE. As 90% of the collected instances of  $S_o$  in this text are located in entries preceding 950 CE, the whole work was for my purposes labelled eOE. In the case of *GD*, there is some scholarly consensus that the OE version of the work, while certainly composed many centuries prior to 950 CE, displays enough language features characteristic of IOE to be placed in this group.

<sup>48</sup> $\chi^2 = 241.87$ ,  $p \leq .0001$ . The test employed is the *chi*-square contingency table test. Probability values were considered statistically significant at the customary 5% level. d.f. = 1, unless otherwise stated.

between  $S_o$  and  $S_{\text{pron}}$ , as suggested for OHG by Axel<sup>49</sup> is clearly ended by the OE period. Thus, I propose that previous research has considerably exaggerated the extent, commonness and distribution of this linguistic phenomenon in OE. The reason for this exaggeration is undoubtedly attributable to the previous lack of systematic empirical data in this area of historical English syntax. In summary, then, my study demonstrates that there is little evidence supporting the notion that  $S_o$  is an active feature of extant OE.

## 6. Types of $S_o$ Identified

The collected instances of  $S_o$  presented themselves as divisible into three main groups: instances of  $S_o$  occurring in hortative subjunctive structures; empty subject relatives in constructions with the verb *hatan* “be called”; and a third, less uniform group. As the first two categories are very reminiscent of idiomatic phrases, primary focus was directed toward investigating the syntactic and pragmatic properties of the third and largest group, which comprises 59.4% of the collected tokens. The remainder of this article will also focus on the third group, yet the two former will be presented briefly below.

In hortative subjunctive structures, empty subject pronouns are observed to combine with subjunctive verbs in constructions functioning in a manner closely resembling imperatives. In light of the fact that imperative structures represent one of few syntactic environments where the modern language prefers empty subjects, this is an interesting observation. An example illustrating such a structure is given in (5) below. The similarity between (5) and (4) above, where an imperative structure is illustrated, should be readily apparent.

- (5) *gif his hwa sie lustfull mare to witanne, sece [ $S_o$ ] him þonne self þæt.*  
 if of-this anyone be desirous more to learn, seek-SBJCT [he] him then self that  
 “if anyone desires to learn more of this, let him seek it himself.”  
 (Or 56.11)<sup>50</sup>

In terms of distribution, 28.2% of the analysed citations containing  $S_o$  occur in hortative subjunctive structures. This is a rather high frequency, but it is no doubt enhanced by the fact that all eighty-four instances of  $S_o$  in LawAf are of this variety. Instances of  $S_o$  in hortative subjunctive structures are found in ten of the eleven analysed texts, but considerable inter-textual variation is observed. For example, no more than 1.5% of the instances of  $S_o$  in *Bede*—corresponding to two tokens—are of this type. It was outside the scope of the investigation to provide an exhaustive overview of  $S_o$  versus  $S_{\text{pron}}$  in such structures, yet I conducted a brief investigation of  $S_o$  vs  $S_{\text{pron}}$  with the verbs *betan* “compensate”, *geldan/gieldan* “give” and *sellan* “give” in

<sup>49</sup>Axel, 28.

<sup>50</sup>Bately, 56.

LawAf, which showed that  $S_{\circ}$  occurs in 82.7% of the cases where a pronominal subject combines with the subjunctive form of these verbs. Of the fourteen occurrences of  $S_{\text{pron}}$ , thirteen featured the indefinite *mon* “one” in subject function. Following van Bergen,<sup>51</sup> I considered *mon* a pronominal subject. If *mon* is considered a full noun phrase (NP), on the other hand, the frequency for  $S_{\circ}$  with these verbs increases to 98.5%. Based on this admittedly restricted data, I suggest that  $S_{\circ}$  may be the preferred form in hortative subjunctive structures. It may also be speculated that these structures are remnants of an older Germanic idiom commonly used in the expression of rules and laws. The fact that an entire 45.7% of the total collected instances of  $S_{\circ}$  in WSCp are found in such structures, and are used chiefly in circumstances where Christ instructs his disciples, provides some evidence in favour of this hypothesis. Of course, a larger study incorporating evidence from other Old Germanic languages must be carried out before concluding.

The second identified category encompasses instances of empty subject relative pronouns occurring in combination with the verb *hatan* “be called”. An example is given in (6) below.

- (6) *He gesette under him gingran casere, [S<sub>o</sub>] Maximus was haten,*  
 he placed under him younger emperor, [who] Maximus was called  
 “He placed under him a younger emperor, who was called Maximus.”  
 (Or 146.20)<sup>52</sup>

This usage is clearly at odds with that of PDE, as at least the standard varieties of the modern language require subject relative pronouns to be fully overt.<sup>53</sup> Of the 450 collected citations containing  $S_{\circ}$ , 12.4% represent what may be referred to as  $S_{\circ,\text{rel}}$ . The highest frequencies for  $S_{\circ,\text{rel}}$  compared with the total collected instances of  $S_{\circ}$  are observed in Or and *Bede*, which feature 43.1% and 17.3%  $S_{\circ,\text{rel}}$ , respectively. These frequencies are considerable, given that five of the eleven texts under analysis feature no instances of  $S_{\circ,\text{rel}}$  whatsoever. The preponderance of  $S_{\circ,\text{rel}}$  in Or and *Bede* may not be motivated exclusively by syntax, however. These works are both historical narratives, in which considerable space is dedicated to introducing the names of characters and places. It may be speculated that this fact leads to higher concentrations of naming constructions compared to other types of text, which consequently may lead to higher concentrations of  $S_{\circ,\text{rel}}$ . Thus, textual factors may be better suited than ones of pure syntax in explaining the high frequencies observed in Or and *Bede*.

Note also that my data only show how many tokens represent  $S_{\circ,\text{rel}}$  compared to the total number of collected instances. No insight is provided as to the relative frequency

<sup>51</sup>Van Bergen, 116.

<sup>52</sup>Bately, 146.

<sup>53</sup>However, there are certainly regional varieties of the language that commonly allow such pronouns to be empty. Such usage could be illustrated in the following hypothetical example: “There is a man at the door wants to come in.”

of  $S_{\emptyset,rel}$  versus what might be called  $S_{pron,rel}$ , i.e. overt relative pronouns in subject function in a relative clause. Examples of instances where *hatan* “be called” combines with an overt subject relative are not hard to find, however. One such example is given in (7) below:

- (7) *Wæs he sended from Westseaxna cyninge, se wæs haten Cwichelmu*  
 Was he sent by West-Saxon king-G, who was called Cwichelmu  
 “He was sent from the king of the West-Saxons, who was called Cwichelmu”  
 (*Bede* 122.9)<sup>54</sup>

The fact that  $S_{\emptyset,rel}$  in my data material is strictly limited to structures with *hatan*—occasionally realised as the archaic variant *hatte*—is indicative of the fact that these structures should be considered fixed, idiomatic phrases.

## 7. The Syntactic Characteristics of $S_{\emptyset}$

The instances in the third category demonstrated considerably less homogeneity than the relatively clearly demarcated tokens discussed above. Even so, numerous patterns emerged, the most important of which are presented in the next section. Instances of  $S_{\emptyset}$  in hortative subjunctives and  $S_{\emptyset,rel}$  will henceforth be omitted from the discussion.

### 7.1. The Clausal Distribution of $S_{\emptyset}$

A main issue in the literature on subject omission in early English has been the clausal distribution of the empty pronoun. It has been suggested that  $S_{\emptyset}$  had free distribution, in that it could occur in all clause types—whether main or subordinate.<sup>55</sup> This claim was corroborated by my study. Below I provide examples of  $S_{\emptyset}$  occurring in a non-conjunct main clause (8), a second conjunct main clause (9), a relative clause (10), a *þæt*-clause (11) and an adverbial clause (12). Note that the instances of  $S_{\emptyset}$  occurring in relative clauses referenced here do not represent cases of omitted subject relatives as presented above. Rather, these are empty subjects occurring in clauses introduced by an object relative.

- (8) [ $S_{\emptyset}$ ] *Wearð þa fordrifen on an iglond ut on ðære Wendelsæ.*  
 [he] became then away-driven to an island out in the Mediterranean-sea  
 “He was then driven to an island in the Mediterranean.”  
 (*Bo* 115.22)<sup>56</sup>
- (9) *Lædde mon his lichoman to Lindesfarena ea,*  
 led one his body to Lindisfarne island

<sup>54</sup>Miller, 122.

<sup>55</sup>Pogatscher, 261.

<sup>56</sup>Sedgefield, 115.

ƿ [S<sub>o</sub>] in broðra lictune wæs bebyrged.

and [he] in brothers' graveyard was buried

“One led his corpse to the island of Lindisfarne, and he was buried in the Brethren's graveyard.”

(Bede 204.5)<sup>57</sup>

- (10) *bæd he þæt heo him biscop onsende,*  
 asked he that they him bishop send  
*þæs lare ƿ þegnunge Ongolþeode,*  
 by-whose teaching and ministry English-people  
*þe [S<sub>o</sub>] rehte, þæs Drihtenlecan geleafan gife leornade*  
 which [he] ruled, the Lord's faith grace learnt  
 “He begged them to send him a bishop, by whose teaching and ministry the English people, which he ruled, might learn the grace of God's faith.”  
 (Bede 158.6)<sup>58</sup>
- (11) *Oft eac gebyreð ðonne se scrift ongit ðæs costunga*  
 often also happens when the confessor hears-of the temptations  
*ðe he him onðetteð*  
 which he to-him confesses  
*ðæt [S<sub>o</sub>] eac self bið mid ðæm ilcum gecostod.*  
 that [he] also self is by the same tempted  
 “often also it happens when the confessor hears of the temptations which he confesses to him, that he himself is tempted by the same thing.”  
 (CP 105.19)<sup>59</sup>
- (12) *On þysum life we ateoriað gif [S<sub>o</sub>] us mid bigleofan ne ferciað:*  
 in this life we waste-away if [we] us with food not sustain  
 “In this life, we waste away if we do not sustain ourselves with food.”  
 (ÆCHom I 457.205)<sup>60</sup>

While the fact that S<sub>o</sub> occurs in all clause types may be well established, very little actual quantification of the clausal distribution of this phenomenon had been carried out prior to my study.<sup>61</sup> Remedying this lack was viewed as one of the central focal points of the present investigation. Thus, I attempted to provide a picture of the relative distribution of S<sub>o</sub> in the various clause types identified.

<sup>57</sup>Miller, 204.

<sup>58</sup>Miller, 158.

<sup>59</sup>Sweet, 105.

<sup>60</sup>Clemons, 457.

<sup>61</sup>In fairness, though, it must be acknowledged that the necessary tools for such an endeavour, namely syntactically annotated corpora, have only in recent years become available. Also, note that Walkden reaches many of the same conclusions as my 2010 MA thesis (Rusten), on which this article builds. Again, see Walkden, ‘Null Subjects in Old English’ (175, fn. 20).

**Table 2** The Distribution of  $S_{\text{pron}}$  vs  $S_{\text{o}}$  According to Clause Type

Clause type	$S_{\text{pron}}$		$S_{\text{o}}$	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Main clauses	10,546	99.5	52	0.5
Second conjuncts	5,637	97.6	139	2.4
Relative clauses	2,779	99.9	4	0.1
Adverbial clauses	7,221	99.5	39	0.5
<i>þæt</i> -clauses	4,414	99.3	33	0.7
Total	30,597	99.1	267	0.9

**Table 2** demonstrates the results, contrasting the total occurrences of  $S_{\text{o}}$  and  $S_{\text{pron}}$  in the corpus texts according to clause type.

This overview underlines once more the fact that  $S_{\text{o}}$  is very rare in OE. In four of the five identified clause types, frequencies for  $S_{\text{o}}$  are below 1%. The only exception to this is observed for second conjunct clauses, which feature  $S_{\text{o}}$  in 2.4% of cases where there is a pronominal subject. The difference between second conjunct clauses and non-conjunct main clauses (0.5%  $S_{\text{o}}$ ) is highly statistically significant,<sup>62</sup> and the same is true for the difference between second conjunct clauses and all other clause types combined.<sup>63</sup> The most important result regarding the clausal distribution of  $S_{\text{o}}$  is thus that empty subjects most frequently occur in second conjunct clauses—which must be said to be the only clause type featuring statistics that even marginally support the claims of previous research about the permissibility of  $S_{\text{o}}$  in OE. The low rates observed for all types of subordinate clause (all in the range of 0.1%–0.7%) make it impossible to agree with Pogatscher’s claim that “das pronomen in altenglischen nebensätze nicht ausgedrückt zu werden braucht” [“the pronoun in Old English subordinate clauses need not be expressed”].<sup>64</sup>

It was noted previously that empty subjects are permissible in second conjunct clauses in both OE and PDE when co-referent with the subject of the immediately preceding first conjunct clause. Given that structures that still permit empty subjects in the modern language were not considered relevant to the study and were thus omitted (see section 3), it is highly interesting to note that empirical evidence now suggests that  $S_{\text{o}}$  actually is best facilitated in second conjunct clauses also in cases incompatible with the rules of the modern language. Combined with data showing that  $S_{\text{o}}$  is most frequently co-referent with a previously occurring subject (to be discussed in section 7.2), the above data prompt the conclusion that English at some stage must have featured rules governing the situational permissibility of deletion of a clause element under coordination that differ substantially from those of PDE. In clear counterpoint to

<sup>62</sup> $\chi^2 = 117.37, p \leq .0001$ .

<sup>63</sup> $\chi^2 = 194.66, p \leq .0001$ .

<sup>64</sup>Pogatscher, 276.

the modern language, it seems that in some rare cases, subject omission occurs in second conjunct clauses regardless of whether the empty pronoun is co-referent with a preceding subject, and also regardless of whether the antecedent actually occurs in the immediately preceding first conjunct clause. In these cases, it seems that the clause type in which the empty pronoun occurs is the deciding factor in sanctioning  $S_0$ . However, the very low frequencies demonstrated above cause considerable doubt as to whether such rules are still “active” in the language at the extant OE stage.

Indeed, the low frequencies suggest quite insistently that  $S_0$  is not a productive feature in OE. This fact in turn raises the question of whether my examples truly do reflect cases where the situational syntactic criteria for deletion of a subject pronoun are actually met. The infrequent occurrence of  $S_0$  seems to suggest otherwise. Also, there is no apparent text-internal systematicity present, in the sense that parallel structures to those featuring  $S_0$  have  $S_{\text{pron}}$  in the overwhelming majority of cases. Without conducting a much more extensive investigation, the possibility of scribal error is one that cannot be dismissed,<sup>65</sup> yet the position adopted here is that the high frequency of  $S_0$  in second conjuncts is indicative of some degree of systematicity. It may, however, be more precise to label this a “remnant of systematicity”, in that these examples—to the degree that they actually reflect systematic rules at all—likely reflect an older set of rules for subject omission in early Germanic, which, by the time of the extant texts, had all but fallen into disuse in OE.

In supplement to the general overview provided by Table 2 above, I also compiled a detailed survey of the distribution of  $S_0$  according to clause type in the individual texts. This survey revealed that one particular text, namely *Bede*, consistently demonstrates relatively high frequencies for this most restricted phenomenon in all clause types—even when frequencies demonstrated by other texts are negligible. In illustration, the frequency for  $S_0$  in non-conjunct main clauses did not exceed 0.4% for any of the other analysed texts, yet *Bede* featured  $S_0$  in 3.4% of the total cases. This is a comparatively high rate in our context of generally low frequencies. The difference between *Bede* and the rest of the corpus of texts was statistically significant in several of the clause types examined.<sup>66</sup> Note, however, that the “high” overall relative frequency observed for  $S_0$  in second conjunct clauses is not due solely to influence from *Bede*, as this clause type genuinely did feature higher frequencies on a general basis.

## 7.2. Characteristics of the Antecedent

The characteristics of the empty subject’s antecedent have constituted another main focus in the research tradition. Such focus is unsurprising, as identification of the

<sup>65</sup> Allen (57) treats the possibility of scribal error in these cases, stating that the majority of the exceptional cases “involve examples in which it would be particularly easy for the author or scribe to forget that the subject of the coordinated clause was not in fact the grammatical subject of the first conjunct”.

<sup>66</sup> *Bede* vs combined frequencies for the other texts in non-conjunct main clauses:  $\chi^2 = 178.44$ ,  $p \leq .0001$ ; in adverbial clauses:  $\chi^2 = 45.4$ ,  $p \leq .0001$ ; in *hæc*-clauses:  $\chi^2 = 29.42$ ,  $p \leq .0001$ .



**Table 3** The Grammatical Function of the Antecedent

Categories	<i>n</i>	%
Subject	152	59.6
Subject + object	6	2.4
Subject + prep. compl.	5	2
Object	55	21.6
Object + prep. compl.	2	0.8
Prepositional complement	10	3.9
“Oblique subject”	14	5.5
Genitive	4	1.6
Miscellaneous	7	2.7
Total	255	100.1

antecedent is a crucial component in deciphering the meaning of a “subjectless” clause. Previous research has provided ample documentation that the antecedent can have a variety of grammatical functions.<sup>67</sup> My study provides quantification here also, and the results are given in Table 3. Note that the table only details the instances of  $S_o$  where the empty pronoun has an overt antecedent. In 4.5% of the total collected instances,  $S_o$  is not co-referent with a syntactic entity, but rather has indefinite or generic reference. In such cases, the indefinite entity corresponding with  $S_o$  is inferable from context only, and frequently corresponds with *mon* “one”.

As Table 3 shows,  $S_o$  was found to be co-referent with a subject in 59.6% of the cases where the empty pronoun has a syntactic antecedent. This rate increases to 64% if instances co-referent with a subject in combination with an additional element are added, and to 69.5% with the addition of instances of  $S_o$  co-referent with an oblique experiencer antecedent.<sup>68</sup> My data also show that the antecedent is restricted to occurring in preceding clauses,<sup>69</sup> whether main or subordinate, and that there need be no grammatical relationship between the clauses containing the empty pronoun and its antecedent. This corroborates claims made by e.g. Pogatscher.<sup>70</sup>  $S_o$  was analysed as co-referent with a single object—whether direct or indirect—in 21.6% of the cases where the empty subject had a syntactic antecedent. When instances co-referent with an object in addition to another element are added, the figure rises to 24.8%. If oblique experiencer antecedents are considered objects, as opposed to subjects, the frequency reaches 30.3%. The miscellaneous category encompasses instances of  $S_o$  co-referent with antecedents with non-nominal function, such as left-dislocated elements and verb phrases.

The antecedent was observed to occur in a preceding main clause in 54.9% of cases, while it occurred in a preceding subordinate clause in 42.4% of cases where a syntactic

<sup>67</sup>See e.g. Pogatscher.

<sup>68</sup>Following Allen, this study took the view that oblique experiencer antecedents should be treated as subjects despite being in the accusative or dative case. I am fully aware that this interpretation is contested.

<sup>69</sup>With one possible exception, all antecedents occurred in preceding main or subordinate clauses.

<sup>70</sup>Pogatscher, 261, 287. See also Kraus, 88–98.

antecedent was present. The difference between the two was statistically significant.<sup>71</sup> One instance of cataphoric reference was also observed, corresponding to 0.4% of cases.

I also attempted to determine whether  $S_o$  and its antecedent must occur in relatively close proximity to each other, or whether they can be separated by longer stretches of text. Thus, I examined the textual “distance” separating the antecedent from the empty pronoun, distinguishing distances of one to three, four to six, seven to ten and more than ten words. It was assumed that the majority of the instances of  $S_o$  would be separated from their antecedents by no more than a few words at most. My reasoning was that short textual distance facilitates correct interpretation to a much greater extent than cases where such distance is longer, and that subject pronouns would be realised as empty only in cases where identification would be relatively straightforward. However, I found that antecedents were quite evenly distributed among the identified categories: overall frequencies were all in the range between 20.7% (one to three words) and 29.7% (more than ten words). No discernible pattern emerged here, apart from demonstrating that  $S_o$  does not necessarily occur close to its antecedent. This fact is most strongly demonstrated in *Bede*, as no less than half of the instances where more than ten words separate  $S_o$  and the antecedent were collected from this source.

It should be noted that the more-than-ten category encompasses examples with many more than eleven words separating the empty subject from the antecedent. In some cases, the two are separated by quite considerable stretches of text, and the empty pronoun may also be separated from the antecedent by intervening pronouns, a factor further complicating the process of identification. Textual distances of around twenty words, as exemplified in (13) below, are not uncommon, although even longer distances are observed.<sup>72</sup>

- (13) *On byssum ealande com upp se Godes þeow Agustinus & his geferan;*  
 on this island came-SG up the God's servant Augustine and his companions.  
*wæs he feowertiga sum.*  
 was he forty-G.PL some.  
*Noman hi eac swylce him wealhstodas of Franclande mid,*  
 took they also likewise them-D interpreters from France with,  
*swa him Sanctus Gregorius bebead.*  
 as them Saint Gregory asked.  
*& [S<sub>o</sub>] þa sende to Æþelbyrhte ærenddracan*  
 and [he] then sent-SG to Æthelberht messenger  
 “To this island came God's servant Augustine, and his companions. They were  
 forty in all. They brought with them interpreters from France, as Saint Gregory  
 had instructed them. And he then sent a messenger to Æthelberht.”  
 (*Bede* (O) 58.4)<sup>73</sup>

<sup>71</sup>Chi-square goodness of fit,  $\chi^2 = 3.9$ ,  $p \leq .05$ .

<sup>72</sup>In the following examples, antecedents are indicated by underlining.

<sup>73</sup>Miller, 58.

Here,  $S_o$  is separated from its antecedent by twenty-two words. The referent of the empty pronoun is *se Godes þeow Agustinus* “God’s servant Augustine”, a third person NP constituting the first part of a coordinated NP functioning as the subject of its clause. Use of the singular verb *sende* indicates that the reference is to “Augustine” alone, excluding “his companions”. Consequently, this seems to be a case where the verbal morphology is instrumental in determining the reference of the empty pronoun.<sup>74</sup> Interestingly,  $S_o$  is not co-referent with the closest-occurring third person NP, *Sanctus Gregorius* “Saint Gregory”. It should thus be evident that a certain amount of text-reading competence is necessary for the correct identification of the antecedent. This was very frequently observed to be the case.

## 8. Identification of the Antecedent

In fact, identification of the antecedent often proved to be no straightforward matter. This has potentially significant implications for the question of what “licenses” empty subjects in OE. I originally operated under the assumption that empty pronouns are permitted when either syntactic, semantic or pragmatic factors make identification of the subject’s referent uncontroversial. However, this assumption was frequently proven wrong, as in many cases there is substantial difficulty involved in identifying the referent. As the ease or difficulty here may contribute to explaining why the phenomenon appears in OE, I determined to investigate the role played by the verbal morphology in such identification. I also investigated whether  $S_o$  systematically corresponds to what may be labelled the “theme” of the discourse.<sup>75</sup>

### 8.1. The Role of the Verbal Morphology

A central concept in early generative studies of empty pronominal subjects is that such subjects are permitted as long as inflections of the finite verb make clear the intended referent. This hypothesis undoubtedly holds considerable merit in the case of archetypal *pro-drop* languages, such as Spanish and Italian. However, this *identification hypothesis* was not corroborated in my investigation of the role of the verbal morphology in permitting  $S_o$  in OE. That notwithstanding, it was observed that the verbal morphology could provide some degree of aid in identifying the referent of an empty subject, primarily in that verbal inflections quite efficiently distinguish between the singular and the plural. However, the verbal inflections are only variably capable of distinguishing person, particularly in the past tense, and there is thus too much syncretism for the morphology to systematically disambiguate the antecedent.

As a case in point, no inflectional distinction is made between the first and third persons in the past indicative singular.<sup>76</sup> Correspondingly, situations may arise

<sup>74</sup>For the use of verbs in the singular with coordinated subjects (see *com* “came” in the first line of the example), see Mitchell, 15–16.

<sup>75</sup>See e.g. Allen, Rosén.

where a verb featuring a ZERO ending or an *-e* ending may be ambiguously first or third person. As the majority of the analysed texts rely to a great extent on the past tense as a narrative device, the failure of the OE inflectional system to distinguish between the first and third persons in the past indicative singular certainly seems to be a considerable flaw. As most of the citations analysed here co-occur with verbs in the past tense, this problem is exacerbated for my purposes. Also, inflectional syncretism was often more extensive than typically suggested by grammars and primers to OE.<sup>77</sup>

My data document that it is not uncommon for  $S_0$  to occur with ambiguous verb forms. For instance, no less than 34.5% of the analysed instances of  $S_0$  combine with a plural verb, where no person distinctions are made. Based on this, I conclude that the verbal morphology does not play a decisive role in influencing the permissibility of  $S_0$  in OE. This conclusion is in full accordance with the statements of e.g. Mitchell and Visser, and in direct contradiction to those of van Gelderen, who, as recalled, claims that  $S_0$  is “common” in OE due to the “strength of the verbal person features”.<sup>78</sup>

My study further shows that many of the problematic cases in terms of identification involve several referents with identical person and number-marking occurring in the same linguistic context. Consequently, even a system with unambiguous morphological marking of the verb would be of little help. One such instance is exemplified in (14):

- (14) *Pa eode he inn, swa swa he his hlafordes ærendo secgan scolde.*  
 then walked he<sub>i</sub> in, as if he<sub>i</sub> his lord's errand say should  
*Ond mid þy he þa geswippe muþe licetende ærend wreahte*  
 and when he<sub>i</sub> then devious mouth-D feigned errand reported  
 & lease fleosewade, þa astod he semminga,  
 and falsely whispered, then rose he<sub>i</sub> suddenly  
 & getogene þy wæpne under his sceate, rædde on þone cyning.  
 and drawing the weapon under his garment, rushed on the king  
*Pa þæt þa Lilla geseah, se cyninges þegn him se holdesta,*  
 when that then Lilla; saw, the king's servant him the firmest,  
*næfde he scyld æt honda, þæt he þone cyning mid scyldan meahte:*  
 not-had he<sub>i</sub> shield at hand, that he<sub>i</sub> the king with shield might.  
 [ $S_0$ ]<sub>i</sub> sette þa his lichoman betweoh beforan þam styngre.  
 [he]<sub>i</sub> placed then his body between before the thrust,  
 & [ $S_0$ ]<sub>i</sub> þurhstong þone cyninges þegn & þone cyning gewundade.  
 and [he]<sub>i</sub> through-struck the king's servant and the king wounded  
 “then he walked in, as if he would deliver his lord's errand. And as he then, with  
 devious words, reported his feigned errand and whispered falsely, he then rose  
 suddenly and, drawing the weapon under his garment, rushed on the king.  
 When Lilla saw this, who was the most devoted of the king's servants, having

<sup>76</sup>As exemplified e.g. by *helpan* “help” (strong, class 3b verb) and *hælan* “heal” (weak, class 1 verb). See Rusten, 88.

<sup>77</sup>See also Haugland, 56–60.

<sup>78</sup>Mitchell, 628; van Gelderen, 121. Visser, 4.

no shield at hand to defend the king, he interposed his body to meet the thrust.  
And he pierced the king's servant and wounded the king."  
(*Bede* 122.21)<sup>79</sup>

Here, two third person singular masculine referents, namely "Eomer" ( $he_i$ , mentioned by name in *Bede* 122.8) and "Lilla" ( $he_j$ ), appear in close proximity to two empty subjects combining with third person verbs. The two instances of  $S_o$  each refers to one of the two third person masculine referents. There are no formal criteria to distinguish between them, and no further identifying markers are present in the discourse. The distance between  $S_{oi}$  and  $he_i$  is also considerable, the two being separated by more than forty words. Such long distance is noteworthy, yet even more so is the fact that the second instance of  $S_o$ —referring to "Lilla", not "Eomer"—intervenes between  $S_{oi}$  and  $he_i$  within this stretch of text.

It should be evident that such intermingling of third person pronouns and referents, both overt and empty, makes extricating the meaning and reference of a "subjectless" clause excessively difficult when relying exclusively on the verbal morphology. Indeed, in cases such as (14), the verbal morphology is of no help in identifying the antecedent. A substantial amount of inference and textual interpretation is needed to correctly identify the reference of both instances of  $S_o$ —and the fact is that deciphering such clauses would probably be equally difficult even had the subject pronouns been overt. It is worth noting that Miller's edition of *Bede* replaces the final empty *he* with a full NP to distinguish between antecedents in the idiomatic PDE translation, where the final line is rendered as "[a]nd Eomær thrust through the king's attendant and wounded the king".<sup>80</sup>

## 8.2. Thematicity

The identification hypothesis has also been shown to be insufficient in explaining the licensing of empty pronouns in several indisputable *pro*-drop languages. Two examples are Vietnamese and Chinese, languages that entirely lack verbal morphology.<sup>81</sup> Numerous addenda have been proposed to the classical *pro*-drop theories to explain this discrepancy, and several studies have proposed that deviating languages are organised along the lines of topic–comment, as opposed to subject–predicate.<sup>82</sup> The argument is that an overarching pragmatic focus functioning as topic need not be repeated in every clause, and "subjects" may be omitted as long as they occur in topic position (i.e. the clause-initial preverbal position), as opposed to any of the other positions in which a subject may occur. Sigurðsson claims that this is the case

<sup>79</sup>Miller, 122.

<sup>80</sup>Miller, 123.20.

<sup>81</sup>See Rosén.

<sup>82</sup>See e.g. Gundel, Rosén.

for Old Icelandic, and that the majority of the instances of subject omission in this language actually exemplify *null topics* as opposed to *null subjects*.<sup>83</sup>

While I did not systematically test the syntactic validity of this “topic hypothesis” in the strictly generative sense, I did attempt to ascertain whether the discourse prominence of the involved characters could be a contributing factor in explaining the occurrence of  $S_0$  in the texts under analysis.<sup>84</sup> The rationale would be that pronouns referring to the most prominent characters could be left empty, as the referents of such empty subjects would be recoverable in the capacity of representing “who the narrative is about”.<sup>85</sup> Example (13) could be interpreted as evidence for such a position. Here,  $S_0$  does not correspond with the immediately preceding third person NP, which would perhaps be expected if syntactic “redundancy” or ease of identification was the main factor permitting use of an empty pronoun, but rather with an NP occurring at some distance. The antecedent in question, “Augustine”, certainly satisfies the criterion of representing “who the narrative is about”.

However, numerous counter-examples showed that this hypothesis also must be rejected. If there is such a “thematicity trigger” present in the citations in my study, it is not systematic and thus inadequate as an explanatory factor. My data thus corroborate Allen’s dismissal of what she calls the “thematicity hypothesis”.<sup>86</sup> However, Allen does allow that it appears “that discourse factors could sometimes interfere with what had become a grammatically controlled process”.<sup>87</sup> This seems a reasonable conclusion, and while the “thematicity hypothesis” is rejected, it seems undeniable that “text-reading skills” must have been one of the key factors in deciphering clauses featuring empty subjects. When thematicity is of little help and verbal inflections only variably helpful, this seems to be the final method of correctly identifying the antecedent—and thus also the meaning of the clause.

## 9. Summary

The present article has been concerned with empty referential pronominal subjects in OE prose. The article has focused exclusively on such instances of empty subjects as are considered incompatible with the rules of PDE. Consequently, the article has not considered relevant “regular” deletion of subjects in second conjunct clauses under co-reference with the subject of the immediately preceding first conjunct clause, or empty subjects occurring in imperative structures.

<sup>83</sup>Sigurðsson, 247.

<sup>84</sup>Note, however, that as these empty subjects do not necessarily occur in topic position, they are not strictly examples of the topics of generative syntax.

<sup>85</sup>This notion, of course, correlates the concepts of *theme* and *topic*. A topic-based approach to empty pronouns has been taken by Rosén, among others.

<sup>86</sup>Allen, 55–6.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 58.

A comparison of the total occurrences of empty and overt referential subject pronouns in eleven OE prose texts revealed that empty subjects occur far less frequently at this stage of the language than previously assumed. Very low overall and text-individual frequencies for these subjects prompted the conclusion that previous accounts of the distribution, extent and “idiomaticity” of empty subjects in OE are unsubstantiated. Indeed, it was concluded that the phenomenon must be described as more or less extinct by the time of the extant OE texts.

Testing of various syntactic criteria judged relevant for the omission of referential subject pronouns by previous research showed that empty subjects most frequently occur in second conjunct clauses and are most often co-referent with a previously occurring subject. As “regular” deletion of coordinated subjects was outside the scope of the study, this led to suggesting that the language at some stage may have featured less restrictive rules governing the permissibility of argument deletion under coordination. However, the few total occurrences led to noting that it is unlikely that such rules are still active with any degree of productivity at the OE stage. It was nevertheless noted that at least some of the observed instances could represent remnants of an antiquated early Germanic syntax. No conclusions could be drawn as to which, or how many, of these instances actually reflect this type of syntax, however. The lack of systematicity observed—in that structures parallel to those featuring empty subjects most commonly have the overt variant—shows that the possibility of scribal error cannot be dismissed. My data reject the hypothesis that subject pronouns are realised as empty only in cases where the referent is easily recoverable, whether through verbal inflections or discourse prominence. A larger study is undoubtedly needed in order to shed more light on this understudied area of OE syntax, yet this initial venture has provided and analysed empirical data that should be of considerable interest for scholars of OE, regardless of framework.

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