

Alliteration and Word Order in Old English Rhythmical Prose

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ABSTRACT. This paper is concerned with the role of alliteration in Ælfric's rhythmical prose. It examines how alliteration works in choosing one over the other from the two possible word order patterns, and shows that alliteration has some effect on the choice. Theoretically, within the Dynamic Model of Language proposed by Hosaka (2016), I argue that the phonological features play a role in determining word order at the Communicative Interface.*

Keywords: alliteration, rhythmical prose, word order variation

1. Introduction

Old English (OE) is assumed to have exhibited relatively free word order, compared with Present-day English (PE). Possible word order patterns such as that of subject and verb and that of verb and object have been one of the most debated topics in the generative approach to the history of the English language. For example, it is argued that heaviness or information status of objects affects word order of verb and object (Pintzuk and Taylor (2006), Bech (2001) and others). Also, from the prosodic point of view, Taylor (2008) argues that clauses involving the 'object-verb' order in Ælfric's work are metrically treated in the same way as in *Beowulf*. In this paper, I focus on the verse sections of Ælfric's *Lives of Saints* and examine how alliteration works to determine word order in his rhythmical prose. In particular, word order of accusative and dative objects in double object constructions is examined in the Dynamic Model of Language (Hosaka 2016) within the generative framework (Chomsky 2000, 2001, 2008).

The corpora used for the current study are the 'verse' sections of Ælfric's *Lives of Saints* from the York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose (YCOE; Taylor et al. 2003)¹ and *Beowulf* from the York-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Poetry (YCOEP; Pintzuk and Plug 2002).

2. Alliteration in Old English Poetry

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¹ I follow Skeat's (1966) distinction between prose and verse in his volumes.

On the basis of Terasawa (2011), this section makes a brief review of alliteration in OE poetry (see also Fujiwara (1990)). In an OE poem, a long line is divided into two half lines: on-verse and off-verse or a-verse and b-verse. Each half line usually contains two rhythmically stressed syllables, and those syllables participate in alliteration. In an on-verse, one or two stressed syllables participate in alliteration, whereas in an off-verse, one stressed syllable usually does. Consider examples (1) and (2) for comparison. In what follows, alliterating letters are in boldface.

- (1) **f**ēasceaft **f**unden. Hē þæs **f**rōfre gebād (Beo 7)
 destitute found he for-that consolation experienced
on-verse (a-verse) *off-verse (b-verse)*
 ‘(he was) found destitute. For that, he lived to see consolation’ (Terasawa 2011: 3)
- (2) on **f**lōdes æht **f**eor gewītan (Beo 42)
 in of-ocean possession far go
on-verse (a-verse) *off-verse (b-verse)*
 ‘(many treasures should) go far into the possession of the ocean’ (Terasawa 2011: 4)

In (1), the two words *fēasceaft* ‘destitute’ and *funden* ‘found’ in the on-verse are alliterated with the word *fōfre* ‘consolation’ in the off-verse. In (2), on the other hand, the word *flōdes* ‘of ocean’ in the on-verse and the word *feor* ‘far’ in the off-verse are alliterated.

Importantly, the second stressed syllable in an off-verse usually does not participate in alliteration. Thus, to maintain alliteration, the ‘noun-adjective’ order was often employed as in (3), in lieu of the ‘adjective-noun’ order of (4).

- (3) **h**æleð **h**īofende, **h**lāford lēofne (Beo 3142)
 noun adjective
 men lamenting lord beloved
 ‘the lamenting men (laid down) the beloved lord’ (Terasawa 2011: 6)
- (4) ***h**æleð **h**īofende, lēofne **h**lāford
 adjective noun
 men lamenting beloved lord (Terasawa 2011: 6)

In (3), the first stressed noun *hlāford* ‘lord’ in the off-verse participates in alliteration with the two stressed words *hæleð* ‘men’ and *hīofende* ‘lamenting’ in the on-verse. In the off-verse in (4), on the other hand, the stressed noun *hlāford* ‘lord’, which has the same sound as the two

stressed words in the on-verse, is placed in the second stressed position, which usually does not participate in alliteration. Thus, the line in (4) would not be considered to be proper, and the ‘noun-adjective’ order, the anomalous word order, is instead used in (3).

3. Ælfric’s Rhythmical Prose

It is often said that Ælfric used a loose metrical strategy in many of his writings. His loose metrical form is named ‘rhythmical prose’, because alliteration is used to put half-lines together into long-lines (Taylor 2008: 125). About Ælfric’s rhythmical prose, Skeat (1966: vol. 2: 1) states that ‘[i]t is remarkable how large a quantity of Ælfric’s work is in an alliterative verse, of a kind which he seems to have constructed according to rules of his own’. He also mentions that ‘[i]t is easily seen that Ælfric’s alliterative lines are rather loosely constructed, and that the alliteration is by no means regular. The usual number of strong accents in a line is four; but there are many lines in which there are five or six’ (Skeat 1966: vol. 2: li) (see also Bredehoft (2005), Lipp (1969), and Pascual (2014)).

There is usually a certain cadence, or rhythm, in lines. Below are the types of rhythm (Skeat 1966: vol. 2: li–lii). In the instances from Ælfric’s *Lives of Saints*, accented syllables are marked with the acute accent (´) and alliterating letters are in boldface. Also, relevant words are underlined.

- (A) The first and third accented syllables are alliterated
 and an scínende cúlfre . scæt of þam fyre
 and a shining dove darted of the fire
 ‘and a shining dove darted out of the fire’ (ÆLS [Basilus] 73)
- (B) The first and fourth accented syllables are alliterated
gebúgan to drihtne . mid geléafan onbrýrde
 inclined to Lord with faith inspired
 ‘inclined to the Lord, inspired with faith’ (ÆLS [Basilus] 58)
- (C) The second and third accented syllables are alliterated
 and genám þæt húsel . þe se hælend geblétsode
 and took that housel that the Saviour blessed
 ‘and took the housel which the Saviour had blessed’ (ÆLS [Basilus] 121)
- (D) The second and fourth accented syllables are alliterated
 þa wéarð se bíscop . mýcclum ablicgod
 then became the bishop greatly astonished
 ‘then the bishop was greatly astonished’ (ÆLS [Basilus] 120)

- (E) The first, second, and third accented syllables are alliterated
sæde be him sýlfum . on súmne tíman
 said concerning him self on tome time
 ‘said concerning himself on a certain occasion’ (ÆLS [Basilus] 202)
- (F) The second, third, and fourth accented syllables are alliterated
 ac ic hrymde sóna . mid sárlicre stáemne
 but I cried soon with sorrowful voice
 ‘but I cried aloud quickly with sorrowful voice’ (ÆLS [Eugenia] 188)
- (G) all four accented syllables are alliterated
 on wæstene wúnigende . fela wúndra wýrcende
 on desert dwelling many miracles working
 ‘dwelling in the desert, working many miracles’ (ÆLS [Basilus] 4945)
- (H) none of them are alliterated
 and hi bégen gesmýrode . mid gehálgudum éle
 and them both anointed with hallowed oil
 ‘and anointed them both with hallowed oil’ (ÆLS [Basilus] 79)

There is also an interesting type of alliteration. It is called transverse alliteration (Terasawa 2011: 18). In transverse alliteration, two sets of alliteration are included in a long line. This is exemplified in (5).

- (5) **br**ūnfāgne **h**elm, **h**ringde **by**rnan (Beo 2615)
 shining helmet ringed corslet
 A B B A
 ‘the shining helmet, the corslet made of ring-mail’ (Terasawa 2011: 18)

In (5), the first and fourth stressed words *brūnfāgne* ‘shining’ and *byrnan* ‘corslet’ participate in alliteration, whereas the second and third ones *helm* ‘helmet’ and *hringde* ‘ringed’ do as well. This type of alliteration is also found in Ælfic’s *Lives of Saints* as in (I) below.

- (I) Eálle þære hæðenra gódas . sýndon déofla
 all the heathen gods are devils
 and drýhten sóðlice héofenas gewórhte
 and Lord verily heavens created
 ‘All the gods of the heathen are devils, and verily the Lord created the heavens.’

(ÆLS [Eugenia] 39–40)

In (I), *háðænra* ‘heathen’ and *héofenas* ‘heavens’ are alliterated, and *sýndon* ‘are’ and *sóðlice* ‘verily’ participate in alliteration.

4. Distribution of Noun and Adjective in *Beowulf*

This section shows how alliteration affects word order of noun and adjective in *Beowulf*.² In the epic poem, both word order patterns, the ‘adjective-noun’ and ‘noun-adjective’ order, are observed. Both word order patterns are illustrated in (6) and (7). In these examples, the adjectives are underlined and the nouns are italicized.

- (6) a. wæs se grimma *gæst* **G**rendel hātan
 was the grim ghost Grendel called
 ‘the grim demon was called Grendel’ (Beo 102)
- b. Swā se *secg* hwata *secggende* wæs
 so the man valiant telling was
 ‘thus the valiant man was telling’ (Beo 3028)
- (adapted from Terasawa (2011: 82)³)
- (7) a. ofer ealde *riht* *ēcean* dryhtne
 over old right eternal Lord
 ‘contrary to the ancient law, the eternal Lord’ (Beo 2330a)
- b. oþ þæt *hrefn* blaca *heofones* wynne / *blīðheort* **b**odode
 until raven black heaven’s joy joyful announced
 ‘until the black raven announced the joy of the heaven’ (Beo 1801–1802a)
- (adapted from Terasawa (2011: 82))

The examples in (6) contain the demonstrative *se* ‘the’, while those of (7) do not.⁴ Regardless of the presence of the demonstrative, both word order patterns are possible: the ‘noun-adjective’ order in (6a) and (7a) and the ‘adjective-noun’ order in (6b) and (7b).

Two more examples are given from the *Beowulf* part of the YCOEP.

² See Getty (2002) for a study of metre in *Beowulf*.

³ The examples in (6) and (7) are complemented with Mitchell and Robinson (1998).

⁴ It is rare to use weak adjectives without a demonstrative, as in (7) {Terasawa 2011: 82}.

then bare one the king royal meats
 ‘then they bare to the king the royal meats’ (ÆLS [Oswald] 89)

In (9), the dative object *þam mædene* ‘the maiden’ precedes the accusative object *deorwurðe gyrðan* ‘costly robes’. Loosely speaking, the nominative subject *ða magas* ‘the kinsmen’ is in the on-verse and the dative object *þam mædene* ‘the maiden’ is in the off-verse. They participate in alliteration. If the dative object followed the accusative object in (9), the nominative and dative noun phrases would be in different lines and then they would not be alliterated.

Also, in (10), the dative object *þam cyninge* ‘the king’ precedes the accusative object *cynelice þenunga* ‘royal meats’. The stressed word *cyninge* ‘king’ in the on-verse and the stressed word *cynelice* ‘royal’ in the off-verse are alliterated.

Some examples of the ‘accusative-dative’ order are given in (11)–(13).

- (11) *Andsæte bið þæt treow . þe æfre grewð . on leafum .*
 hateful is the tree that ever grows in leaves
 and *næfre nænne wæstm . his scyppende . ne bringð .*
 and never no fruit his Creator not brings
 ‘Hateful is the tree that is always sprouting into leaf and never bears
 any fruit for its Creator’ (ÆLS [Julian and Basilissa] 246–247)
- (12) *betæhte his bisceop-stol oþrum bisceope sona .*
 committed his episcopal see other bishop soon
 ‘forthwith committed his episcopal see to another bishop’ (ÆLS [Denis] 112)
- (13) *oþþe hwi hí dældon dearnunga heora æhta*
 or why they distributed secretly their possessions
waclicum mannum unwislicum ræde
 mean men unwise counsel
 ‘or why they secretly distributed their possessions to mean men by unwise counsel’
 (ÆLS [Cecilia] 208–209)

In (11), the negative accusative object *nænne wæstm* ‘no fruit’ precedes the dative object *his scyppende* ‘his Creator’. The two words with the same sounds [n], *næfre* ‘never’ and *nænne* ‘no’, are in the on-verse and the one word with [n], *ne* ‘not’, is in the off-verse. In the authentic OE poetry, there is one or two alliterated words in the on-verse and one word in the off-verse.

If the accusative object followed the dative object in (11), there would be two alliterated words in the off-verse, which would cause a metrical anomaly. This may be true of (12).

In (13), the dative object *waclicum mannum* ‘mean men’ is in a different line from the accusative object *heora æhta* ‘their possessions’. The dative object is alliterated with the noun phrase *unwislicum ræde* ‘unwise counsel’; they both have the same sound [w].

Among the examples found in the corpus, one fixed expression is frequently used. It is illustrated in (14) and (15).

- (14) oðþæt hi geoffrodon heora lác þam godum .
 until they offered their sacrifice the gods
 ‘until they offered their sacrifice to the gods’ (ÆLS [Sebastian] 340)
- (15) þæt hi huru þam godum heora lác geoffrodon .
 that they at least the gods their sacrifices offer
 ‘that they might at least offer their sacrifices to the gods’
 (ÆLS [Julian and Basilissa] 368)

(14) indicates the ‘accusative-dative’ order, and (13) the ‘dative-accusative’ order. There found four instances of the ‘accusative-dative’ order and one instance of the ‘dative-accusative’ order. The distribution of both word order patterns is summarized in Table 2, where the expression like (14) and (15) is named the *lác* sentence. The frequencies of both patterns are almost the same. If the *lác* sentence is excluded, however, the ‘dative-accusative’ order will outnumber the ‘accusative-dative’ order by about two to one.

Table 2. Word order of dative and accusative nominal objects in ÆLS

	(V) Acc-Dat (V)	(V) Dat-Acc (V)	total
total	11 (47.8%)	12 (52.2%)	23 (100.0%)
w/o <i>lác</i> sentence	7 (38.9%)	11 (61.1%)	18 (100.0%)

6. Dynamic Model of Language

This section first reviews Hosaka’s (2016) Dynamic Model of Language, which is depicted in Figure 1.

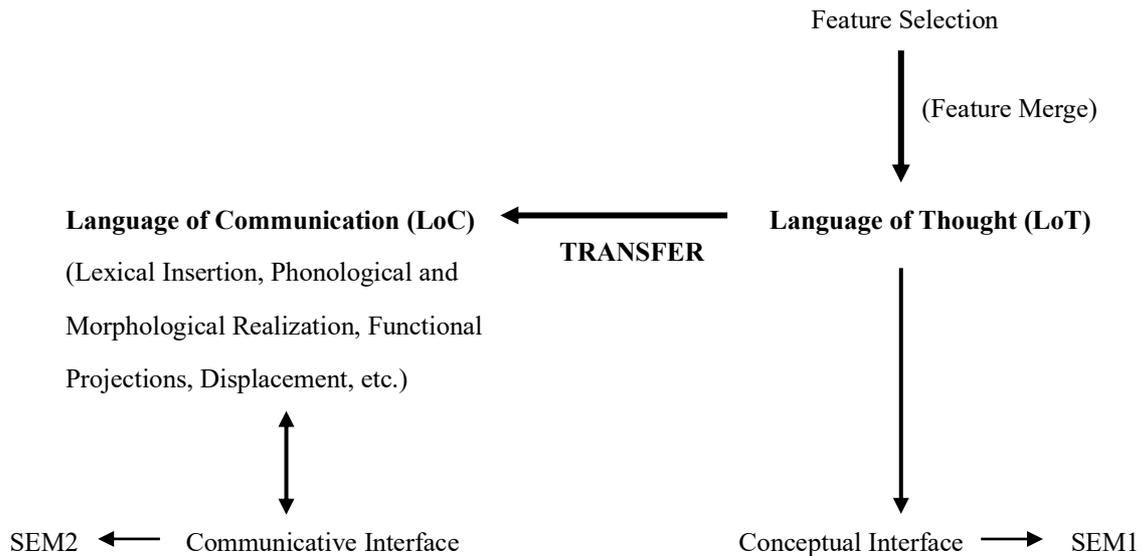


Figure 1. The Dynamic Model of Language (Hosaka 2016: 201)

He assumes that the external merge of semantic features takes place before Transfer and that movement (internal merge) and agreement operate after Transfer. In this model of language, universal language competence is assumed to lie in Language of Thought (LoT), before Transfer, whereas languages are formed in Language of Communication (LoC), after Transfer. Given this, he proposes that LoT has the same representation through the history of English as in (16).

(16) Language of Thought

[$\sqrt{\text{like}}$ $\sqrt{\text{John}}_{\langle \text{exp} \rangle}$ [$\sqrt{\text{like}}$ $\sqrt{\text{these socks}}_{\langle \text{th} \rangle}$ $\sqrt{\text{like}}$]]⁵

(Old English, Middle English, Modern English, Present-day English)

(Hosaka (2016: 204) with some modifications)

The representation in (16) is a direct output from LoT and it is intrinsically visible at the Conceptual Interface. At the Communicative Interface, on the other hand, the thematic roles are invisible to hearers. Thematic roles, however, are required to be visible at the Communicative Interface. He thus formulates this as in (17).

(17) Visibility Requirement

Thematic roles of NP must be visible at the Communicative Interface.

(Hosaka 2016: 205)

⁵ In (16), $\langle \text{exp} \rangle$ and $\langle \text{th} \rangle$ are short for experiencer and theme, respectively.

The thematic roles will be made visible with the help of case inflections or functional projections. Prosody would also help to make thematic roles visible at the interface.

We next consider effects of alliteration in syntax within the Dynamic Model of Language described above. Let us take (18) as an example.

- (18) **brimclifu** **blīcan,** **beorgas** **stēape** [= (8a)]
 sea-cliffs shining hills high
 ‘silvery sea-cliffs, high rocky shores’ (Beo 222)

External merge takes two syntactic objects and creates a new one. In (18), the operation combines *beorgas* ‘hills’ and *stēape* ‘high’ into a new syntactic object $\{beorgas, stēape\}$. At LoT, the semantic relationship has been established between the noun and adjective, whereas their word order has not been determined.

The derivation proceeds: the syntactic object $\{beorgas, stēape\}$ is merged with an independently constructed one $\{brimclifu, blīcan\}$. At LoT, the syntactic object created is transferred to LoC. There, the phonological features play an important role in determining the final word order to meet the metrical requirements.

Word order of dative and accusative objects in the OE double object construction can also be dealt with in a similar way. Let us take examples (19) and (20) for illustration.

- (19) þa **bær** man þam **cyninge** *cynelice* *þenunga* [= (10)]
 then bare one the king royal meats
 ‘then they bare to the king the royal meats’ (ÆLS [Oswald] 89)
- (20) **betæhte** *his* *bisceop-stol* **oprum** **bisceope** *sona* . [= (12)]
 committed his episcopal see other bishop soon
 ‘forthwith committed his episcopal see to another bishop’ (ÆLS [Denis] 112)

In both examples, while word order of the two noun phrases is irrelevant, the semantic relationship has been established between them at LoT, where the recipient or theme role has been assigned to one or the other noun phrase. At LoC, on the other hand, the recipient and theme roles are made visible by dative and accusative, respectively. Consequently, Visibility Requirement of (17) is fulfilled at the Communicative Interface. Moreover, the phonological features of those noun phrases arrange the sequence of the phrases to meet the metrical requirements.

Rhyme is also relevant to determine word order of accusative and dative objects at LoC. The suffix *-nysse* ‘-ness’ plays a role between the clauses in (21).

- (21) Almachius hire andwyrde . Awurp þine dyrstignysse
 almachius her answered cast thy presumption
 and geoffra þam godum arwurðlice onsægednysse .
 and offer the gods reverent sacrifice
 ‘Almachius answered her: cast away thy presumption, and offer to the gods reverent
 sacrifice.’ (ÆLS [Cecilia] 332–333)

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I examined how alliteration works to determine word order of dative and accusative objects in Ælfric’s rhythmical prose, and showed that alliteration (and rhyme) to some extent has an effect on determination of word order in his writings. As Skeat (1966) mentioned, it could be said that Ælfric’s rhythmical prose might be a loosely constructed alliterative ‘prose’. Theoretically, I argued that the phonological features play a role in determining word order at LoC within the Dynamic Model of Language proposed by Hosaka (2016).

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