Object preposing in 15th century Drenthe*

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1. Introduction

In this article, I will present a case study of scrambling of objects over subjects and its loss in Drenthe, a Northeastern dialect of Dutch in the 15th century. Whereas in Middle Dutch objects can precede the subject in the middle field (1), this is not possible in Modern Dutch (2).

(1) dat den acker Reyner gebruket hevet.
    that the field-ACC Reyner used has
    ‘that Reyner has used the field.’

(2) *dat de akker Reyner gebruikt heeft.
    that the field Reyner used has
    ‘that Reyner has used the field.’

Compared to a general study by Shannon (2003), my case study suggests that the loss of object preposing in Drenthe happened a good deal earlier than indicated by Shannon. This may imply that the material in Shannon represents an average of the Dutch dialect areas, which brings into relief the need for a more fine-grained study of the various Dutch dialect areas.1 Alternative explanations for the difference between the two studies will be discussed. This paper moreover investigates the effect of the grammatical and semantic status of the NPs involved in the diachronic development of object fronting, e.g. whether the preposed element and the subject are full NPs or pronouns. I will discuss the loss of the case system as a possible factor for the loss of object fronting.

2. Earlier work

Shannon (2003) compares the occurrence of pronominal objects preceding full NP subjects in literary corpora from 16th, 19th and 20th century Dutch,
respectively. He observes a sharp drop in object preposing within each of the time intervals studied. The sharpest drop occurred between the 16th (73% object before subject) and the 19th century (26% object before subject). By the 20th century, object preposing had dropped to 13%.

Shannon presents a number of factors that might promote object preposing, including pronoun type, pronoun case, pronoun animacy, pronoun cliticization, subject type (proper versus common), subject definiteness, subject animacy, subject semantic role and difference in length between the object and the subject. He found that for the object, the factors pronoun type, animacy, semantic role and case play a role. The most typical candidates for object preposing in Shannon’s dataset were animate personal pronouns as well as pronominal experiencers, which often coincide with dative case. For subjects, the factors length, definiteness, NP type, animacy and agentivity turned out to play a role. Among the instances of scrambling, the subject was typically long, indefinite, common, inanimate and non-agentive. Whereas these factors did not have a large effect in his 16th century data, where object preposing was the rule, their effect increased over time.

3. Methodology

My case study is set in Drenthe in the 15th century. The property under investigation has not been looked at in detail in such an early text in prior research. Furthermore, this case study enables us to make statements about this specific region at this point in time. Case studies like Shannon’s using literary texts have the disadvantage that these texts can often not be precisely situated in time and space. This article argues for a further exploration of the dialectal variation that we find in Middle Dutch by investigating texts of which date and provenance are known.

This study is based on a digitised version of a collection of verdicts from Ordelen van de Etstoel van Drenthe (Keverling Buisman 1987, 1994). This text comprises more than 5000 verdicts (approximately 50 verdicts per year) totaling 222.000 words. It comprises the time span from 1399 to 1518. The corpus is based on one script made by four copyists on the basis of the original verdicts. According to Postma (2004:147) these copyists preserved the original forms of the verdicts.

The text was divided into ten-year time intervals. Per time interval, ten percent of the linguistic material was analysed, with a minimum of 2000 words. From this dataset, all clauses were selected that contain a subject and at least one internal argument. I looked into both main and subordinate clauses.
However, since the word order of main clauses is less free because of the Verb Second constraint, the set of clauses where object preposing could possibly occur was quite small for main clauses. Relevant object preposing contexts are restricted to those where the first position in the clause is filled by something other than the subject, e.g. an adverbial (3) or one of the internal arguments of ditransitive verbs (4).

(3) So sollen um de erffgenamen bynnen 6 weken zijn gelt wedder geven.
    so shall him the inheritors within six weeks his money back give
    ‘The inheritors will give him back his money within six weeks.’

(4) Dat sall oir Huge betaelen.
    that shall them Hugo pay
    ‘Hugo shall pay that to them.’

I present my data in time intervals of 20 years from the year 1400 onwards. I did not include unaccusative, passive and impersonal verbs in my study. As the structure and semantics of these verbs are special (cf. Bennis 2004), they allow for a more flexible ordering of their arguments. I excluded these cases from the analysis, since I am primarily interested in the kind of variation that is severely restricted in Modern Dutch (cf. examples (1) and (2)). These restrictions on the primary data resulted in a dataset of 497 subordinate clauses and 146 main clauses.

4. Results

4.1 General picture

Table 1a and 1b show the development of object fronting in 15th century Drenthe in subordinate and main clauses, respectively.

The tables indicate that there is a decrease in object preposing towards the end of the 15th century. I split the data on subordinate clauses into two halves (one from 1400 to 1459 and one from 1460 to 1519) and compared these two halves. Fisher’s exact test and Pearson’s chi-square both reveal that there is a significant difference between the first and the second half of the 15th century (Fisher’s exact: \( p = .0011 \); Chi-Square: \( p > .001 \)). The data for main clauses indicate the same development. As main and subordinate clauses do not seem to vary in the percentage of object preposing they allow for, the data for these two clause types are treated together in the remainder of this paper.
4.2 Pronominality

The data presented above comprise pronouns as well as full NPs. Pronouns often occur higher in the clause than full NPs. There are various reasons for this. First of all, they most typically refer to given elements in the discourse. Theories of word order that incorporate discourse structure agree on the fact that elements referring to given entities tend to occur in the left periphery of the sentence, while newly-introduced material typically occurs more to the right. Furthermore, pronouns are always quite short. The precedence of short over longer elements, which has first been formulated by Behaghel’s (1930:85) ‘law of growing constituents’, implies that of two constituents the longer one is normally placed after the shorter one. Functional theories (e.g. Hawkins 1990, 1994) explain this ordering by referring to processing constraints, the line of argumentation being that shorter elements are easier to process and should therefore precede.

Unlike full NPs, pronouns have retained case marking up to Modern Dutch times. If an argument is marked for case, it can be placed in different positions in the clause without ambiguity.

To measure the effect of pronominality on object preposing, the status of both subject and scrambled element (NP or pronoun) should be taken into account, resulting in four possible oppositions: (1) the order full NP object — full NP subject, (2) full NP object — pronominal subject, (3) object pronoun — subject pronoun and (4) object pronoun — full NP subject.

Table 1a. Object preposing in Drenthe in the 15th century, subordinate clauses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1400–1419</th>
<th>1420–1439</th>
<th>1440–1459</th>
<th>1460–1479</th>
<th>1480–1499</th>
<th>1500–1519</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>object - Su</td>
<td>10 (10%)</td>
<td>11 (10%)</td>
<td>7 (8%)</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>33 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Su - object</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>497</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1b. Object preposing in Drenthe in the 15th century, main clauses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1400–1419</th>
<th>1420–1439</th>
<th>1440–1459</th>
<th>1460–1479</th>
<th>1480–1499</th>
<th>1500–1519</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>object - Su</td>
<td>4 (17%)</td>
<td>5 (17%)</td>
<td>2 (5%)</td>
<td>1 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>12 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Su - object</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2.1 Scrambling of object full NPs over subject full NPs
There is only one example of an agentive verb with a full NP preceding the full NP subject (cf. example (1) is repeated here as (5)):

(5) dat den acker Reyner gebruket hevet (1420)
that the field-ACC Reyner used has
‘that Reyner has used the field.’

There are no occurrences of this pattern within the set of main clauses. This pattern is thus almost absent in Drenthe in the 15th century.

4.2.2 Scrambling of full object NPs over subject pronominals
This pattern is non-existent in my data in both subordinate and main clauses.

4.2.3 Scrambling of object pronominals over subject pronominals
There is only one clause in which an object pronoun precedes a subject pronoun:

(6) ende konnent de nyet eens werden.
and can it those.DEM not agree-on
‘and if they cannot agree on it.’

The personal pronoun *het* occurs in its reduced form *t*. It is well known that short and syntactically light material tends to appear more to the left. Taking into account syntactic weight and length, it is obvious that a reduced form promotes object fronting. Furthermore, the subject is a demonstrative pronoun. Demonstrative pronouns often behave more like full NPs than like pronouns and are therefore more inclined to remain in situ (cf. Heylen 2005).

4.2.4 Scrambling of object pronominals over subject full NPs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. The occurrence of pronominal objects in front of full NP subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>objPron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- SuFullNP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SuFullNP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- objPron</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We see that the category ‘objects = pronominals; subjects = full NPs’ has the highest propensity for scrambling. Furthermore, the graph indicates a quite
steady decrease in scrambling during the 15th century. Object preposing in Drenthe decreases from 61% in the first time interval to 0% in the last.

The type of scrambling discussed here, i.e. the preposing of a pronominal object over a subject full NP, is also the one discussed by Shannon, which allows me to compare his data to mine. The first observation is that he found a higher overall percentage of scrambling in his 16th century data. Whereas he found 73% percent of object preposing for the entire 16th century, I only find an average of 38% for the 15th century. If I include non-agentive verbs (as Shannon has done) the figures increase somewhat (40%), but there is still a major difference between the two corpora. Second, we see that the decrease in object preposing proceeds much more quickly in the Drenthe corpus than in the different corpora studied by Shannon. The difference is even more astonishing if we take into account that my study covers legal texts. These texts are often thought to preserve older stages in the language. They are thus conservative rather than progressive.

How can we account for such a remarkable difference between the two studies? One possible explanation is that there is a huge dialectal difference between the regions discussed in the two studies. Shannon’s corpora consist of literary texts, which cannot be ascribed to one specific dialect area. If these corpora contain texts from different regions, any underlying regional variation will be obscured.

The second explanation might be that we are dealing with genre-specific variation. Shannon’s corpus comprises literary and dialogic texts, whereas
the current study is based on legal verdicts. Genre-specific variation might be grounded in the difference in tolerance towards ambiguity in the different text genres studied. As will be discussed in more detail below (Section 5), the decline of morphological case marking is already far advanced in 15th century Drenthe. Loss of case marking increases the chances of ambiguity. It is plausible that narrative texts such as those investigated by Shannon tolerate more ambiguity than legal verdicts, where it must be clear who is doing what to whom.

We can conclude that full NPs hardly ever scramble, whereas pronominals account for most of the occurrences of scrambling in my database. Most examples of object preposing are pronominals occurring to the left of full NPs. When there is a full NP and a pronominal in a language that allows flexible ordering of its arguments, the pronoun is more likely to precede the full NP, as pronouns unite a number of properties that promote object preposing: they are typically shorter than full NPs, definite and referential. The presence of a subject and an object pronoun might level out these scrambling-promoting qualities.

4.3 Scrambling of direct objects versus indirect objects

The data presented above include both direct and indirect objects. As these often behave differently, I will take a look at both grammatical types separately.

Table 4. Scrambling of direct and indirect objects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1400–1419</th>
<th>1420–1439</th>
<th>1440–1459</th>
<th>1460–1479</th>
<th>1480–1499</th>
<th>1500–1519</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DO-Su</td>
<td>11 (12%)</td>
<td>10 (9%)</td>
<td>4 (5%)</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>26 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SU-Do</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total DO</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IO-Su</td>
<td>5 (14%)</td>
<td>11 (27%)</td>
<td>6 (18%)</td>
<td>2 (11%)</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>26 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SU-IO</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total IO</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When we compare the behaviour of direct and indirect objects, it is first of all clear that indirect objects scramble more frequently (16%) than direct objects (5%). Furthermore, we see that object preposing decreases somewhat earlier with direct objects than with indirect objects. A steady proportion of the indirect objects precedes the subject throughout this period, with the exception of the final time interval. In fact, they account for almost all of the instances of scrambling in my corpus after 1459. How can we account for this
difference between direct and indirect objects? Two factors that could explain the increased likelihood of scrambling for indirect objects are pronominality and animacy. First of all, indirect objects are more often pronouns than direct objects. My corpus data confirm this general tendency: 52% of the indirect objects are pronouns whereas only 27% of the direct objects are pronominal. Second, almost all indirect objects are animate. Shannon (2003) found an effect of animacy on object preposing in that animate pronouns prepose more often than inanimates. It is thus possible that the high proportion of animates among the indirect objects promotes scrambling. I investigated the effect of animacy within the direct objects, which can be animate or inanimate in my corpus. Though animates (6%) scrambled more often than inanimates (3%), this difference was not significant.

5. Case

A traditional explanation for the loss of word order flexibility is the decline in morphological case marking (e.g. Jespersen 1922, Hawkins 1986, Blake 1994, Haeberli 2001). As Dutch loses morphological case, the question arises as to whether the decline in case marking is also a motivating factor for the change observed in Middle Drents.

Middle Drents does not have a separate morphological form for case marking on accusatives and dative full NPs. There is an -n added to both dative and accusative determiners. (Note, however, that there is still a difference between accusative and dative in the pronominal system).

(7) dat den olden Johan Kevelinge ene wette gescheyt is.
‘that the old Johan Keveling, a punishment passed is’

(8) dat Wemmele voirscr. enen stock geleget hevet den
commander-DAT aforementioned a stick-ACC laid has the
voirden bueren van Beylen.
‘that Wemmele aforementioned has renounced his right to property to
the commander before the citizens of Beylen.’

Proper names that are in the dative and accusative case often get an extra -e or -n respectively.

(9) Item tusschen Johan Oestynge ende Rolof Heymynge is gewyst, dat
also between Johan Oestynge and Rolof Heymynge is decided that
Johan Rolove dat gelt betalen sall vanden erve ende den scaede, de dair up gegaen is. Johan shall pay Rolof the money of the inheritance and the damage that has happened there.

'Also between Johan Oestynge and Rolof Heymynge is decided, that Johan shall pay Rolof the money of the inheritance and the damage, that has happened there.'

(10) Item tusschen Roloff Dedynge ende Heyne Smyt is gewyst, dat Roloff-vorscr. Heynen ene wette doen sall. Aforementioned Roloff shall pass a punishment over Heynen.

Table 5. The encoding of dative case on full NPs in the course of the 15th century

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1400–1419</th>
<th>1420–1439</th>
<th>1440–1459</th>
<th>1460–1479</th>
<th>1480–1499</th>
<th>1500–1519</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>case</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No case</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% case</td>
<td>72.73%</td>
<td>37.50%</td>
<td>56.25%</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>54.55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen in Table 5, Middle Drents has already lost quite a lot of case marking in the 15th century. Whereas we still find morphological case marking in the first time interval studied, thereafter case marking is quite erratic. The absence of a clear pattern in the diachronic developments of case marking in the 15th century indicates that the case system is breaking down. On average, a full indirect object NP is case marked 51% of the time. This suggests that speakers arbitrarily use case, and that hearers cannot rely on case as a faithful cue for the identification of the subject and the object of a sentence.
If I only count the proper names in my sample, these are only case-marked 35% of the time. My corpus contains a large number of proper names, as is to be expected of a corpus of legal verdicts. As these verdicts record binding decisions to solve disagreements between different parties, it is of vital importance to avoid confusion about who is doing what to whom. As case marking is quite erratic within the whole period studied, the risk of ambiguity is high. A narrative or dialogic text tolerates more ambiguity than a legal text, where serious legal consequences might ensue if the doings of the various parties in a lawsuit are reported ambiguously. This might thus provide an alternative explanation for the difference observed between this study and Shannon’s. Besides reflecting a dialectal difference, there might thus be a genre-effect.

We saw in the data that full NPs hardly ever scramble. This might be explained by the fact that case marking is already severely impoverished in 15th century Drenthe. The loss of case marking may lead to ambiguity, especially with non-canonical word orders. Note that in example (5) above the full NP is unambiguously marked for case, a fact that might license scrambling. Pronouns, on the other hand, have preserved case marking up to modern Dutch times. It should be noted, however, that, even in languages that have preserved case marking on full object NPs (e.g. German), the occurrence of full NP objects in front of subjects is almost always the marked (i.e. less frequent) option (cf. Lenerz 1977). The decline of morphological case marking on full NPs can therefore not be the only explanation for the few occurrences of full object NPs preceding subjects.

The fact that scrambling of pronominals, which still preserve case marking up to modern times, is also lost in the course of the 15th century is a further indication that the breakdown of the case system cannot be the only explanation for the loss of object preposing. The lack of a clear pattern in the diachronic development of case marking on full NPs (Table 5) and the decrease of scrambling with pronominals within the 15th century indicates that there is no direct mapping between the impoverished case system and the rapid decline of object fronting within this century.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, I have investigated the occurrences of object preposing in 15th century Drenthe. A significant decline in object fronting was observed in the course of the 15th century. This was a major difference with Shannon (2003) whose data from the 16th century suggest that the occurrence of pronominal objects preceding full NP subjects still was the canonical word order. It is
possible that the Drenthe region was relatively early in its development towards the order SubjectNP–ObjectPronoun. The texts studied by Shannon either originate from dialect areas that preserve the order ObjPronoun — Subject NP longer, or represent a mixture of various dialects, where dialectal variation with respect to the property investigated is levelled out. This hypothesis, however, has to be verified carefully by comparing different dialect areas. This emphasizes the need for a thorough investigation of the historical morphosyntactic development in the different regions. Genre-specific variation was discussed as an alternative explanation for the difference between the two studies. We also saw that full object NPs hardly ever prepose. Object pronominals account for most of the scrambling in my database.

I addressed the question whether the decline of the case system can serve as an explanation for the loss of object preposing and the different behaviour of full NPs and pronouns. My data suggest that there is no clear pattern in the diachronic development of case marking in the course of the 15th century. The relative absence of morphological case marking on full NPs can explain the absence of scrambling of nominals in my dataset, but not the decline in the fronting of object pronouns, at least not directly, since these continue to be case marked.

Notes

* I would like to thank the audience at the TiN-dag 2006 as well as Ans van Kemenade, Helen de Hoop, Leonie Cornips, Monique Lamers, Griet Coupé, Nynke de Haas and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments and suggestions.

1. This research is part of a larger NWO-programme undertaken at the Radboud University Nijmegen, which focuses on dialect variation and dialect contact.

2. This text corpus was digitised by Gertjan Postma, a researcher affiliated to the NWO-programme *standardisation and variation: the influence of language contact on the emerging Dutch standard language*.

3. As part of the NWO-programme *standardisation and variation: the influence of language contact on the emerging Dutch standard language*, a corpus of texts from 1400 to 1700 is currently being compiled at the Radboud University Nijmegen.

References

Behaghel, Otto. 1930. “Von deutscher Wortstellung [On German word order]”. *Zeitschrift für Deutschkunde (Zeitschrift für deutschen Unterricht)* 44. 81–89.


