

# Syncretism, ambiguity and constituent order in Old English

In this paper, the interaction between morphological case-marking and surface constituent order is investigated with a quantitative analysis of an Old English text. The hypothesis that syncretism in Old English morphological case-marking restricts surface constituent order is motivated and developed. This hypothesis is then tested on an Old English corpus, and it is demonstrated that the morphological form of the constituents in fact imposes no constraints whatsoever on surface order. The consequences of this conclusion are discussed, and alternative sources of disambiguation are described.

Section I describes the theoretical motivation for the research and its relationship to more general issues in theories of syntactic change. Section II describes how a quantitative analysis of Old English will be used to test the hypothesis. Section III sets out and discusses the results of the analysis. Section IV draws conclusions and outlines the implications for theories of syntactic change.

## I Theoretical motivation

In general, there is a correlation between constituent order and overt morphological case-marking. It is widely accepted that those languages which have rich systems of morphological case-marking also allow freer constituent order, while those with relatively impoverished case morphology tend to have a more fixed order.

For instance, in Modern German, a language with rich case morphology, the relative order of subject, verb and object can vary, as in (1) and (2). In (3), both arguments follow the verb.

(1) Der Hund beißt den Mann.  
The[NOM] dog bites the[ACC] man.  
'The dog bites the man.'

(2) Den Mann beißt der Hund.  
The[ACC] man bites the[NOM] dog.  
'The dog bites the man.'

(3) Schnell beißt der Hund den Mann.  
Quickly bites the dog the man.  
'The dog bites the man quickly.'

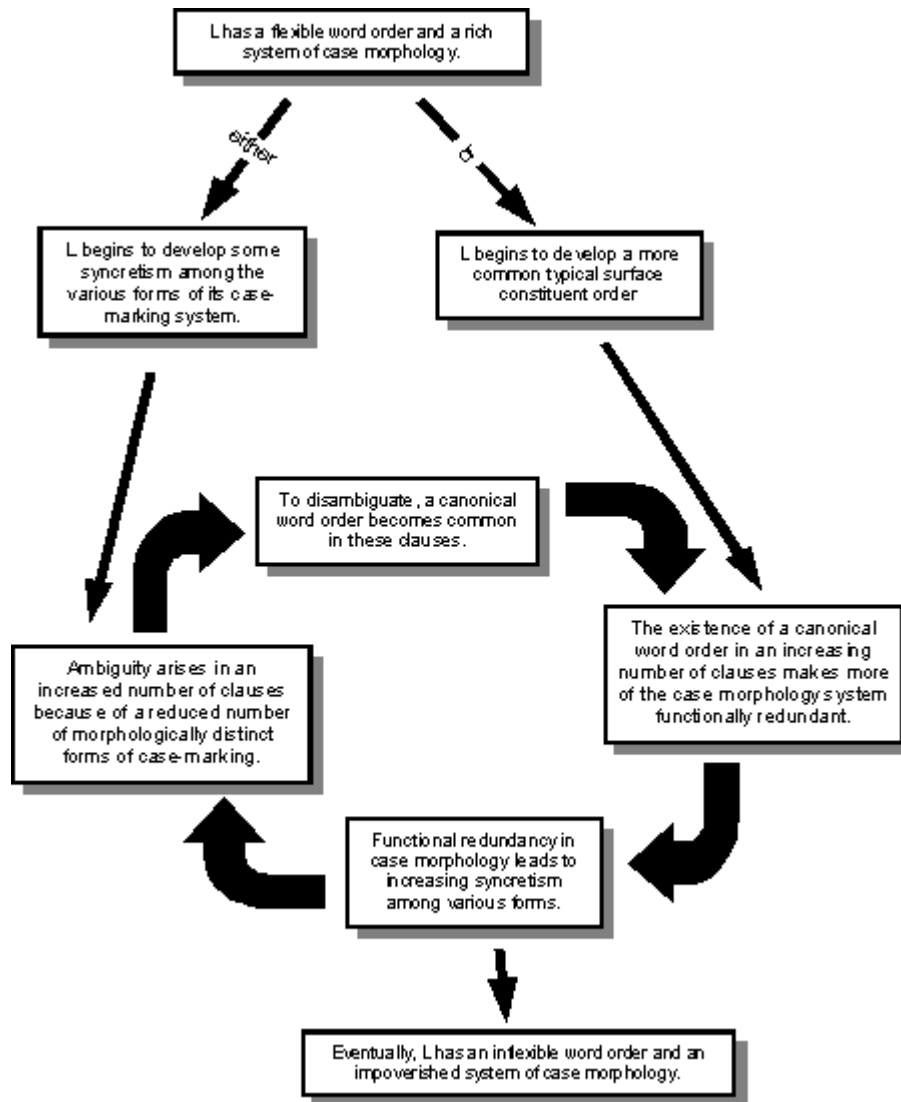
Such variations do not occur in modern English, a language with very little overt case morphology. It is impossible to interpret *the man* as the subject in (4):

(4) The dog bites the man.

This robust correlation between constituent order and case morphology naturally suggests the related hypothesis that the two characteristics are causally linked. Such a link could take one of two forms: either (a) the loss of overt case morphology limits the possibilities for constituent order variations; or (b) the 'seizing-up' of word order causes the loss of overt case morphology. These theories are most plausibly fleshed out from a functional perspective, as shown in (5):

**(5) Diachronic hypotheses:** In a language which changes from morphology-rich to morphology-poor, either (a) the loss of morphology removes one way of indicating the semantic roles of the various sentence constituents, so a more rigid word order develops in order to avoid ambiguity; or (b) the seizing up of word order makes overt case morphology redundant as an indicator of semantic roles, and so leads to its eventual loss.

Both of the diachronic hypotheses in (5) point to a gradual change in a language over time, and either would plausibly account for a language's changing from a morphologically rich state with flexible constituent order to a morphologically impoverished state with rigid constituent order<sup>1</sup>. For a language L that undergoes such a change, we might sketch the process as in Figure 1:



**Figure 1**

There is a distinction to be made between the existence of a set of overt and distinct morphological case-marking forms in L, and the existence of L's morphological case system itself. As Pintzuk (1999-b, p.4) writes with reference

<sup>1</sup> Many writers have discussed similar models of linguistic change, though the cyclic, self-reinforcing nature of the process sketched above is emphasised only by a few: see Samuels, 1971; Traugott, 1972.

to English in particular, “Although there was a great deal of syncretism in forms throughout the Old English period, the system was alive and well until early in Middle English”.<sup>2</sup>

## II Research methodology

One distinct feature of the hypothetical process illustrated in Figure 1 is its implication for variations in constituent order at any given time in the development of L. Essentially, (5)’s prediction is that surface constituent order should be free in clauses where the arguments’ case morphology is unambiguous, but fixed in clauses where the arguments’ case morphology is ambiguous due to syncretism of forms. This prediction is formulated in (6).

**(6) Synchronic prediction:** For a given clause in any language undergoing a change of the type depicted in Figure 1, if syncretism in case morphology means that the function of a particular DP argument is not clearly indicated by its morphological form, it is the surface order of the constituents that disambiguates.

Note that it is the surface order of constituents that may lead to ambiguity, regardless of the underlying syntactic mechanism that generates the order. Variations in the surface order of constituents may be derived by processes such as topicalisation, scrambling, raising, projection raising, or dislocation. In the rest of this paper, I will refer to these various processes collectively as ‘ordering processes’. The hypothetical process illustrated in Figure 1 would therefore predict that *all* ordering processes would be rare where there is syncretism in case morphology<sup>3</sup>. This specific prediction is (7).

**(7) Synchronic prediction (revised):** For a given clause in any language undergoing a change of the type depicted in Figure 1, if syncretism in case morphology means that the function of a particular DP argument is not clearly indicated by its morphological form, it is the surface order of the constituents that disambiguates. Therefore, in such cases, no ordering process is permitted that would disrupt the typical surface order.

I will test the synchronic prediction (7) by analysis of Old English. This language is appropriate because it had both a rich morphological case system and a substantial amount of syncretism in its case morphology. Case (nominative, accusative, genitive, dative) was marked morphologically on nouns, pronouns, adjectives and determiners. A collection of paradigms is set out in the Appendix to this paper.

Old English also allowed a variety of relative orders of subject and object, as shown in (8) and (9).

**(8)** Ða iudeiscan axodon Crist hwæt he wære.  
The Jews asked Christ who he was. (**S...O**)  
‘The Jews asked Christ who he was.’ (Ælfric’s *Lives of Saints*: Christmas 11.30)

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<sup>2</sup> This distinction gives rise to the question of exactly when in the evolution of L we should say that the system itself has collapsed. According to the scheme sketched above, this will be a difficult line to draw because the change is cyclic and gradual.

<sup>3</sup> For ease of exposition, I assume in this paper that the derivation of a language’s ‘typical’ surface order does not involve an ordering process as such; rather, it is the surface order that results when no ordering process is applied. Under this assumption, SVO order in German is the order that results when no constituent is topicalised (and no other ordering process takes place). But this assumption is not crucial to the argument in this paper. According to some syntactic frameworks, the generation of a clause *always* involves an ordering process (topicalisation, for instance). In this kind of framework, an SVO clause in Modern German is generated by topicalising the subject. In the alternative framework, standard subject-topicalisation would simply be regarded as an ordering process that generates, not disrupts, the typical constituent order, so it would not be excluded by (7).

- (9) His wites wuldriað þa wynsumun<sup>4</sup> tunglan.  
His beauty glorify the winsome stars. (O...S)  
'The winsome stars glorify his beauty.'

According to the synchronic prediction (7), we therefore expect Old English clauses to exhibit a flexible constituent order in general, but a much less flexible constituent order in the exceptional cases where the verb's DP arguments are morphologically case-ambiguous. This is the prediction that I will test in this paper.

### III Results

The source text for this study was Ælfric's *Lives of Saints* (composed between the years 993 and 998), which contains 8066 clauses. Using an electronically tagged corpus<sup>5</sup>, I isolated all main clauses. Since the purpose of the study was to analyse the relative order of subject and object arguments, I excluded clauses that did not include both these arguments, such as those with unaccusative verbs or absent (e.g. deleted) subjects.

I also considered whether to include those clauses where the subject or object (or both) were pronominal. It is commonly accepted that pronouns in Old English are clitics which tend to appear immediately left of the finite verb. In practice, this means that – regardless of other factors, such as ambiguity – when a nominal argument and a pronominal argument both precede the verb, the order will be [Nominal]-[Pronominal]-[Finite Verb], and rarely [Pronominal]-[Nominal]-[Finite Verb]. When both arguments are pronominal, the order is always [Subject Pronominal]-[Object Pronominal]-[Finite Verb], and never [Object Pronominal]-[Subject Pronominal]-[Finite Verb]. The implications of these restrictions are that ordering processes with certain results which are generally allowed in clauses with nominal arguments are not allowed in clauses with pronominal arguments.

It should be noted that most pronouns are not case ambiguous (only third person neuter and plural personal pronouns can be either NOM or ACC). This means that, when the clauses are sorted into ambiguous and unambiguous categories, any effects of pronouns in the dataset would affect the unambiguous category much more heavily than the ambiguous category.

When both subject and object are pronominal, no ordering process is ordinarily allowed which would cause the object to precede the subject, so including these clauses in the dataset would skew the results towards a subject-object order. As noted above, the unambiguous category would be skewed more heavily than the ambiguous category. Therefore, I decided to exclude those clauses where both object and subject were pronominal.

When one DP argument is pronominal and another nominal, the pronominal argument will tend to appear immediately left of the verb. This could have one of two effects. If the nominal argument also appears before the verb, it will always precede the pronominal argument. If the nominal argument appears after the verb, the pronominal argument will always precede it. When deciding whether to include such clauses in the dataset, I took account of the following:

- Either subject or object can be pronominal.

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<sup>4</sup> Some editors correct to *wynsumum*.

<sup>5</sup> The text was taken from Taylor, Warner, Pintzuk, & Beths, 2001. Analysis was conducted using the CorpusSearch program (Randall, 2000; available via <http://www.ling.upenn.edu/mideng/>).

- Assuming it is equally common for a subject to be pronominal as for an object, including pronominal arguments will not skew the data. This is because any surface order differences that are found in those clauses with pronominal subjects will be found equally in those clauses with pronominal objects<sup>6</sup>.
- Even if this assumption is false (that is, even if subjects are more likely to be pronominal than objects, or vice versa), this should not skew the data because the relative order of subject and object depends on another factor, namely whether the nominal argument precedes or follows the finite verb. That is, including pronouns would only affect the results if it were also true that, in clauses with pronouns, the nominal argument is more likely to appear on one given side of the finite verb than on the other.

Because of these considerations, I decided to *include* data where one argument is pronominal and the other is nominal.

The resulting dataset contained 3298 clauses, just under 41% of the clauses in the corpus.

I then divided these 3298 clauses into those in which the subject precedes at least one object argument, and those where at least one object argument precedes the subject. The results are shown in Table 1.

	Count	Proportion
Subject precedes object	2933	89%
Object precedes subject	365	11%

**Table 1**

Next, I analysed the case morphology of the subject and object DPs in each clause type from Table 1, isolating those clauses in which any of the DP arguments were morphologically ambiguous between NOM and an oblique case (ACC, GEN, DAT) – that is, those clauses in which at least one DP argument was an *a priori* candidate for being either the subject or an object<sup>7</sup>. The results are shown in Table 2.

	Subject precedes object		Object precedes subject	
	Count	Proportion	Count	Proportion
At least one DP argument is ambiguous	1059	36.1%	142	38.9%
No DP arguments are ambiguous	1874	63.9%	223	61.1%

**Table 2**

Table 2 shows no significant difference between the proportion of case-ambiguous arguments in clauses where the subject precedes the object compared to those where the object precedes the subject. This is contrary to the

<sup>6</sup> Of course, including pronouns may or may not change the proportion of all clauses that have subject-object order, for instance. This is not relevant. What would be relevant would be if including pronouns changed the proportion of *just the ambiguous* or *just the unambiguous* clauses that have subject-object order.

<sup>7</sup> Consultation of the paradigms in the Appendix indicates that such ambiguity can arise between singular nouns (strong masculine or neuter); and plural nouns (weak, or strong and any gender).

synchronic prediction (7), which predicted that the data should have been ‘skewed’ towards one particular order for clauses with ambiguous arguments.

Note that there is a related analysis that I did not perform. I could have analysed the relative orders of direct and indirect objects, then isolated cases of ambiguity among ACC, GEN and DAT cases where the different cases are used to indicate which object is which. This analysis would have been another way to test the synchronic prediction (7): the predicted outcome would have been that the surface order of direct and indirect objects should be more fixed when there was more than one candidate for each type of object due to potential ambiguity between the oblique cases. However, based on the outcome of the analysis I *did* perform, set out above, I would expect that this second prediction would not be fulfilled; like the relative ordering of subject and objects, the relative ordering of direct and indirect objects would be unaffected by ambiguity in case morphology.

The absence of a clear trend in Table 2 is not in itself conclusive; other factors may be intervening. In particular, even in those clauses in which a DP argument is *in itself* morphologically ambiguous, other facts (morphological or otherwise) about the clauses may disambiguate. In the remainder of this section, I will discuss these potential ‘disambiguating factors’.

### Disambiguation by elimination

The most obvious source of disambiguation is by appeal to the unambiguous morphological forms of other DP arguments in the same clause. In a clause such as (10) below, for instance, the DP *deor & nytenu* is ambiguously case-marked, as it could be either NOM or ACC. But the DP *Twægan þissera* is unambiguously ACC, and therefore must be the object. The listener can therefore deduce that *deor & nytenu* is the subject of the clause.

(10) Twægan þissera dæla habbað deor & nytenu mid us  
 Two (of) these things have animals and cattle with us  
 ‘Animals and cattle have two of these things in common with us.’ (*Lives of Saints: Nativity 98*)

What we actually want is clauses like (11), in which there are at least two ambiguous DPs and disambiguation by elimination is impossible (see later for disambiguation by verb agreement).

(11) ...þæt geswuteljað þa wundra þe god wyrð þurh hi.  
 ... (as) testify the miracles that God works through they / them.  
 ‘...as testify the miracles that God works through them.’ (*Lives of Saints: Swithun 457*)

Table 3 shows the same data as Table 2, but with the ambiguous clauses broken down into those in which only one DP is ambiguous, and those in which two or more are ambiguous.

	Subject precedes object		Object precedes subject	
	Count	Proportion	Count	Proportion
Two or more DP arguments are ambiguous	82	2.8%	9	2.5%
Exactly one DP argument is ambiguous	977	33.3%	133	33.7%
No DP arguments are ambiguous	1874	63.9%	223	61.1%

Table 3

As this data shows, no bias towards one constituent order pattern arises, even when we disregard those clauses in which only one DP is ambiguous (that is, even when we look only at the shaded row).

### Disambiguation by Det / Adj case-marking

So far, a DP has been classed as ambiguous if the morphology on the noun could be either NOM or oblique. However, another obvious disambiguating factor is the form of the determiner or adjective, if present. A noun whose case morphology is ambiguous in itself may nevertheless be an unambiguous subject if its determiner or adjective is unambiguously NOM, or an unambiguous object if its determiner or adjective is unambiguously oblique. An example of such a clause is (12), where *masse-preost* lacks case morphology but is disambiguated by its unambiguous NOM determiner *se*.

(12) on mergen se masse-preost abead þæs mædenes word þam mæron bisceope  
 in morning the mass-priest reported the maiden's word to the famous bishop  
 'In the morning, the mass-priest reported the maiden's message to the famous bishop.'  
 (*Lives of Saints: Eugenia 72*)

If we disregard instances like (12), the number of clauses that are still classed as ambiguous is substantially reduced. In the analysis whose results are shown in Table 4, I took the clauses that were classed as ambiguous in Table 3 (the shaded row in Table 3) and divided them into those where at least two DP arguments are morphologically ambiguous even with respect to determiners and adjectives<sup>8</sup>, and those where this is not the case.

	Subject precedes object		Object precedes subject	
	Count	Proportion	Count	Proportion
At least two DP arguments are ambiguous even with respect to Det/Adj	25	30.5%	4	44.4%
All the DP arguments, or all but one, are disambiguated by Det/Adj	57	69.5%	5	55.6%

Table 4

Although there appears to be more difference between the percentages for the two constituent order categories in the shaded row of Table 4 than in the shaded row of Table 3, this difference arises primarily because the dataset has been whittled down to so few examples in the 'Object precedes subject' category. Although 44.4% of the clauses (four out of the nine) in this category remain ambiguous, this percentage is not really a reliable guide, since the dataset is only a ninth of the size of the 'Subject precedes object' category. (If just one more clause had been disambiguated, the proportion would have been 33.3%, which is noticeably more similar to the 30.5% result in the other category.) Working with such small numbers, I conclude that it is not possible to come to a reliable conclusion about the distribution of the data. In order to analyse this more thoroughly, it would be necessary to use a larger dataset, something that was not possible in this study for practical reasons.

<sup>8</sup> Consultation of the paradigms set out in the Appendix shows that this refers to neuter singular DPs and plural DPs of all genders, with or without strong or weak adjectives.

## Disambiguation by verb agreement

The subject agrees in person and number with the finite verb. Therefore, a clause is disambiguated if only one of the candidate DP arguments agrees with the verb; that DP must be the subject, and the others objects. An example of such a clause is (13), where the plural verb *sendon* matches only one plural DP, *the idolaters*.

- (13) *þa sendon ða hæðengildan mid hetelicum geðance ærende to þam casere.*  
Then sent the idolaters with enraged mind message to the emperor.  
'Then the idolaters, with enraged mind, sent a message to the emperor.' (*Lives of Saints: Apollonius* 193)

Clauses that remain ambiguous, even taking into account verb agreement, are those such as (14).

- (14) *Florus ða cydde þam cyninge his willan*  
Florus then made known to the king his will  
'Then Florus made his will known to the king.' (*Lives of Saints: Maur* 144)

## Disambiguation by verb case agreement

The fact that some verbs normally take arguments with a specific case could be used to disambiguate subjects and objects if only one candidate DP can be interpreted with this case. However, of the clauses that remain ambiguous in Table 4 (the shaded row), none fit in this category.

## Disambiguation by gender

The roles of two DP arguments may be disambiguated by background knowledge of their genders. Speakers of modern languages with grammatical gender, such as French and German, can generally be expected to know the gender of most nouns in their languages. Assuming the same to be true of Old English speakers, this would disambiguate any arguments where, for instance, the ambiguity was between one gender's NOM and another's ACC. Knowledge of the gender would allow the speaker to infer the case. However, of the clauses that remain ambiguous in Table 4 (the shaded row), none fit in this category.

## Non-syntactic sources of disambiguation

The analyses above illustrate that, when all potentially disambiguating factors are taken into account, the final proportion of relevant Old English clauses that are syntactically ambiguous is very small. Furthermore, it should be noted that even the syntactic ambiguity that remains does not necessarily correspond to *final*, or overall, ambiguity in the mind of the listener. For this reason, speakers of any language can tolerate a certain amount of syntactic ambiguity without functional pressure arising to eliminate it.

On a purely syntactic understanding of ambiguity, it is possible to construct an ambiguous sentence in any language one chooses (consider, for instance, the famous headline POLICE SHOT MAN WITH KNIFE, or the even more famous and probably apocryphal MONTY FLIES BACK TO FRONT). Modern English also benefits from – or suffers from, if you prefer – what we might call substantial 'syncretism of vocabulary': a large proportion of English lexical items correspond to more than one possible lexeme<sup>9</sup>. But, of course, such syntactic or lexical ambiguities

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<sup>9</sup> The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* fills 7½ columns of very small type in listing more than sixty different definitions and senses of the word *set* – and that's only as a noun.

can usually be ironed out by appeal to context, semantics or sheer common sense. We know that a knife can't be used to shoot a man, so we interpret *with knife* as a PP modifying *man*, not as a PP adjunct to *shot*, even though either interpretation is syntactically valid.

The same lesson applies to Old English. It would be a mistake to regard *any* instance of syntactic ambiguity as a 'problem' which creates functional pressure for syntactic change to eliminate it. Pintzuk (1999b, p.10) cites (15) below (her (22)) as a syntactically anomalous sentence whose ambiguity is resolved by appeal to pragmatic considerations; (16) is an even more obvious example from *Lives of Saints*<sup>10</sup>.

(15)& Botwulf ongon mynster timbran æt Icanho  
And Botwulf began monastery build at Icanho  
'And Botwulf began to build a monastery at Icanho.'  
cf. ?? 'And a monastery began to build Botwulf at Icanho.' (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* 654)

(16)Fela sædon þa dry-men þurh deofles cræft  
Many things said the magicians through devil's craft  
'The magicians said many things through the devil's craft.'  
cf. ?? 'Many things said the magicians through the devil's craft.' (*Lives of Saints: Auguries* 114)

The likelihood of semantic/pragmatic disambiguation therefore goes some way to explaining how the small number of syntactically ambiguous clauses in Old English (or any language) are dealt with, and therefore weakens the support given by the existence of these clauses to the account of change depicted in Figure 1.

In any language, there will still be a small minority of clauses which are genuinely ambiguous. Ambiguity arises sometimes from scope distinctions (*Every student must pass a test*) and sometimes from syntactic or lexical ones (MAN FOUND DRUNK IN SHOP WINDOW). It seems plausible to assume that a small amount of potential ambiguity in a language is tolerated by speakers, since it can be disambiguated by context, explanation, or paralinguistic features – or simply avoided.

## IV Summary and implications

The results presented in this paper give no support at all to the synchronic prediction set out in (7). The expected difference between the two types of clause is not borne out by the data, even when clauses with other potentially disambiguating factors are excluded.

As discussed in section II above, Old English was an appropriate language for this study because of its rich morphological case system, flexible constituent order and substantial syncretism. By the Middle English period, the language had lost most of its overt case morphology and its constituent order had seized up. Figure 1 gives an account of this change as morphologically and functionally driven, but this account implies the synchronic prediction in (7). Since the results of this study show that this prediction is not fulfilled, this is evidence against this particular account of syntactic change.

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<sup>10</sup> I have judged it to be sufficient simply to quote a couple of examples of this kind of disambiguation, rather than undertaking a quantitative analysis. This is partly because semantic/pragmatic disambiguation relies on subjective, contextual judgements which are impossible to quantify, and partly because the nature of the electronically tagged corpus I used in this study makes such an analysis impractical. A cursory survey of some of the data, however, suggests that examples like (15) and (16) make up a substantial majority of the remaining syntactically ambiguous clauses.

Other writers have proposed alternative accounts of this change with reference to Old English (see, for example, Roberts, 1997; Pintzuk, 1999-a), invoking morphological or purely syntactic explanations. Consideration of these alternative accounts is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will briefly discuss whether the account described in this paper might be modified to take account of my findings.

If the account is to be rescued, some explanation must be provided of why Old English does not match the predictions. Perhaps, we might argue, the tenth-century prose analysed here is too early in the development of the English language to show any significant effects of the process of change which it was later to undergo. This is a difficult claim to justify, since we know that the syntactic change in question was well entrenched by the early Middle English period (Pintzuk, 1999-b, p.1), but perhaps we could recharacterise the process shown in Figure 1 as much more abrupt than we previously assumed. We might postulate a kind of linguistic 'watershed', perhaps the duration of only a single generation, during which time syntactic change snowballed. If this were the case, and the process took place late in the Old English period or early in Middle English, it would be difficult to find a substantial corpus that would be representative of the language in an intermediate stage in the process of change; most texts would exhibit either relatively free constituent order (if composed before the 'watershed') or relatively fixed constituent order (if composed since the 'watershed'). This revised account would explain why the present study produced no evidence of Old English undergoing change.

But, even if this could be established as a possibility, this still may not be enough to resolve the difficulties generated by this study. Regardless of the duration of the process depicted in Figure 1, the account rests on a functional explanation of syntactic change which is simply not borne out by the data. The driving force behind the loss of morphology on the one hand and the seizing-up of constituent order on the other is supposed to be *functional pressure*, the pressure to introduce syntactic restrictions on ordering processes in order to 'patch up' the language and avoid ambiguity. Yet the results of this study suggest that no such functional pressure exists in Old English, even though it appears to meet all the requisite criteria, namely substantial syncretism in case morphology combined with a flexible surface constituent order. This shows that these criteria (alone) do not necessarily give rise to any functional pressures for change.

As an account of syntactic change, therefore, the theory summarised in (5) and depicted in Figure 1 seems at best incomplete. Whatever mechanism drives syntactic and morphological changes of the kind undergone by English in this period, they are not driven by functional pressures to avoid ambiguity.

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# Appendix

## Old English Paradigms

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### Nouns

#### Masculine

	Singular	Plural
Nom	-∅	-as
Acc	-∅	-as
Gen	-es	-a
Dat	-e	-um

#### Feminine

	Singular	Plural
Nom	-u	-a, -e
Acc	-u	-a, -e
Gen	-e	-a, -ena
Dat	-e	-um

#### Neuter

	Singular	Plural
Nom	-∅	-u
Acc	-∅	-u
Gen	-es	-a
Dat	-e	-um

#### Weak

	Singular	Plural
Nom	-a	-an
Acc	-an	-an
Gen	-an	-ena
Dat	-an	-um

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### Determiners and pronouns

#### Determiner and demonstrative pronoun

	Masculine	Neuter	Feminine	Plural
Nom	se	þæt	seo	þa
Acc	þone	þæt	þa	þa
Gen	þæs	þæs	þære	þara
Dat	þæm	þæm	þære	þæm

#### Third person personal pronoun

	Masculine	Neuter	Feminine	Plural
Nom	he	hit	heo	hie, hi
Acc	hine	hit	hie, hi	hie, hi
Gen	his	his	hire	hira
Dat	him	him	hire	him