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Abstract

Word order and the null subject construction in Old English

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The principles and parameters (P&P) theory proposed by Noam Chomsky in the 1980s to explain many varieties of natural language has been adopted by many theoretical linguists working in the framework of generative grammar. Although these phenomena have been taken up in linguistic typology, they have been studied in a more disciplined way using the P&P theory of generative grammar. Studies of diachronic syntax within generative grammar have also adopted the P&P theory to explain changes in the varieties of a language over time.

The English language is well known for having quite drastically changed its word order over its history. This change is often assumed by P&P theorists to have been caused by parametric changes in verb movement. Verb-final order is frequently attested in subordinate clauses in Old English (OE), but has disappeared in Modern English. The null subject phenomenon has been proposed to be one of the parameters explaining variation among languages. This phenomenon is frequently observed in Old English as well as in some Italic languages, whereas it is not permitted in Modern English.

Phi-features are hypothesised in P&P and its advanced offshoot, the minimalist program, to explain agreement between subject and verb on a morphological basis. Verb movement is assumed to be caused by tense inflection of the verb, and null subject is assumed under this hypothesis to be licensed by the rich agreement inflection of the language. Further, the inflection of tense and subject–verb agreement is assumed to be divided into two functional mechanisms. This paper analyses the relation between verb-final order and null subject in OE on the basis of the above hypothesis.