From SOV to SVO: Old Norse Influence on English Constituent Order

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1 Introduction

Languages are dynamic and everchanging. Throughout history languages all over the world have evolved in all sorts of directions. Influenced by different factors they slowly but surely grow apart, merge or develop in their own directions. They have done so since the beginning of human existence and will continue to do so as time passes on. The evolution of the English language is an excellent example of how languages are able to change on all parameters – from phonology to morphology and from semantics to the deeply embedded syntax. Since the syntax of languages tends to be relatively stable, it makes it even more interesting when changes do happen within this field. One of the most discussed and investigated changes in the history of the English language is the shift that happened in English syntax between Old English and Middle English, namely the change in constituent order. It is a well-known fact that the constituent order of English clauses changed from being Subject Object Verb (SOV) to Subject Verb Object (SVO), but what is not so straight forward is the reason behind this change. The shift has long been a topic of discussion in academic circles, and when researching for the reason behind it, it becomes clear that scholars seem to disagree presenting contradictory arguments for how this change could happen and what caused it.

In this article, I argue that it was the influence of Old Norse that was the reason why English changed its constituent order from SOV to SVO during the Middle English Period. In order to confirm the aforementioned statement, I will take my starting point in the Viking Invasion of England, giving a brief outline of the history of the Scandinavian settlement and adversarial co-existence with the English in the ninth and tenth century. In extension to this, I will turn my attention to the language of the Vikings, Old Norse, analyzing the syntactic structure and arguing that it had SVO as its underlying constituent order. I will furthermore analyze Old English, the language spoken in England at the time of the Viking Invasion, arguing that this language had SOV as its underlying constituent order. Having

explained the syntactic differences between the two languages, I will move into an explanation of the development of English constituent order throughout time and clarify when the basic constituent order changed from SOV to SVO. In the same section, I will account for how such major syntactic changes can happen within a language taking my starting point in Faarlund's (1985, 367) 'principle of diachronic change'. In the final section of this article, I will account for which aspects within the English language that were influenced by the language contact with Old Norse. I will touch upon changes within the English lexicon and English morphology as well as English syntax. Finally, I will claim that the extensive language contact with Old Norse can be viewed as the reason for the change in English constituent order and based on the ideas of Trips (2002), I will give my reasons for why this assumption seems legitimate.

2 The Viking invasion

2.1 Historical background

The Vikings arrived in the British Isles for the first time in 787 A.D. beginning their extensive plundering attacks. In the beginning, the attacks primarily targeted towns and monasteries on the northeastern coast of England (Dawson 2003, 40), but from 850 A.D. the attacks became more widespread and the Scandinavians started seeing England as a place for colonization. In 865 A.D. another great Norse army arrived in East Anglia and in 867 A.D. the Scandinavians captured York, the capital of Northumbria (40). Many of the Norse attackers remained in Northumbria after having captured York, making a home for themselves, and this became the first permanent settlement of Scandinavians in England (40). The attacks had left the northeastern part of England largely in the hands of the Norse (40), so in 878 A.D. the country was divided into two – the south and west under the rule of the English King Alfred and the north and east under Scandinavian control. The southwest became known as Wessex (= "Old England"), while the northeast became known as Danelaw (see appendix 1) and became an area of Scandinavian law and administration – the area was thus no longer a part of the English polity (Emonds and Faarlund 2014, 35). In 892 A.D. the Scandinavians invaded Wessex and King Alfred and his army renewed the fight against them. In 896 A.D. the Scandinavians were defeated and they dispersed to Northumbria, East Anglia and Normandy (Dawson 2003, 42). Almost all of England was again under English control by the middle of the tenth century, but Norse influence was still strong in the northern and eastern parts of England (42). 991 A.D. became a flashpoint for the Scandinavians; they defeated the English at the Battle of Malden in Essex, and as a result of this the Saxon King Ethelred, the successor of King Alfred, ordered the massacre of all

Scandinavian adult males (Emonds and Faarlund 2014, 36). As a response, the Scandinavian King Sveinn undertook to conquer all of England and after a decade of fierce warfare, he finally succeeded seizing the throne of Wessex in 1014 A.D. (36). King Sveinn died shortly after seizing the power, but his son Canute took over and in the following decades he ruled over a unified England. In 1041 A.D. Edward the Confessor of Anglo-Saxon descent seized the power, and this became the end of the Scandinavian era in England. After Edward the Confessor died, Harold Godwinson assumed power and ruled only a couple of months, before being dispatched in September 1066 A.D by William the Conqueror at Hastings as a part of the Norman Conquest of England (36).

2.2 Scandinavian influence in England

No significant cultural contact took place between the two cultures before 850 A.D. (Dawson 2003, 41). However, as more and more Scandinavians settled permanently in England, their influence also became more and more significant. Although their co-habitation was largely adversarial (Emonds and Faarlund 2014, 34), the Norse and the English still lived side by side in the same towns and must have intermingled at markets and in the streets (39). Given the likelihood that most Viking warriors were men, it is assumed that a lot more males than females emigrated to England from Scandinavia (39). Many Danelaw families must, therefore, have consisted of Norse men and English women (39), and the two cultures were thus mixed in this way. This is also indicated by the fact that the Norse patronymic *-son* slowly but surely came to replace the standard Old English patronymic *-ing* (53). Even the Anglo-Saxon leader, Harold Godwinson, who ruled after the end of the Scandinavian era, had a family name with a Norse patronymic emphasizing that he as well was of Scandinavian descent and that the *-son* patronymic was gaining popularity. The Norse patronymic finally replaced the Old English patronymic in 1200 A.D. after the Norman Conquest (53). According to most scholars, it was at this point in time, after the Norman Conquest, that the language of the Scandinavians, Old Norse, had the most significant impact on the English language. Both Englishmen and Scandinavians were thoroughly dispossessed and practically enslaved under the Conquest and these miserable circumstances gave rise to a fusion of the two previously separate populations (42-43). The intense contact between the two cultures resulted in several changes, including the change in English constituent order. This change and the other linguistic changes brought on by the presence of the Scandinavians will be discussed later in this article in section 4 and 5.

3 SOV and SVO constituent order

Different languages have different constituent orders. For some time now, it has been generally accepted among linguists to divide the world's languages into categories based on their basic constituent order. This basic constituent order, which first of all is the order of subject and object relative to the verb, is considered a useful way of topologizing languages and a primary characteristic from which other features of a language can be predicted (Haugan 2000, 15). As briefly mentioned in the introduction, Present-Day English is said to have a Subject Verb Object (SVO) order with its clauses typically being of the form *Frogs eat flies*. Other languages, like Japanese, have clauses of the form Subject Object Verb (SOV) with clauses like *Frogs flies eat*, and yet other languages, like Arabic, have clauses of the form Verb Subject Object (VSO) with the constituent order *Eat frogs flies* (Smith 2004, 9). There exist additionally three basic constituent orders – namely Verb Object Subject (VOS), Object Verb Subject (OVS), and finally Object Subject Verb (OSV). These are the six possible orders in which the three constituents, subject, verb and object, can be arranged into a clause. However, the last three constituent orders are rarely found, and scholars agree that most of the world's languages fall within the first three categories of constituent orders (8). Since this article will investigate the change from SOV to SVO in Middle English, there is no further need to examine the remaining constituent orders, and from now on my focus will be only on the SVO and SOV orders.

3.1 What characterizes an SVO language?

An SVO language is a language where the basic constituent order is Subject Verb Object. The modern-day variants of languages like English, French and Spanish are all SVO languages as well as all the Scandinavian languages – both of the insular and the mainland type (Haugan 2000, 20). An example of a clause with SVO constituent order can be seen in figure 1.
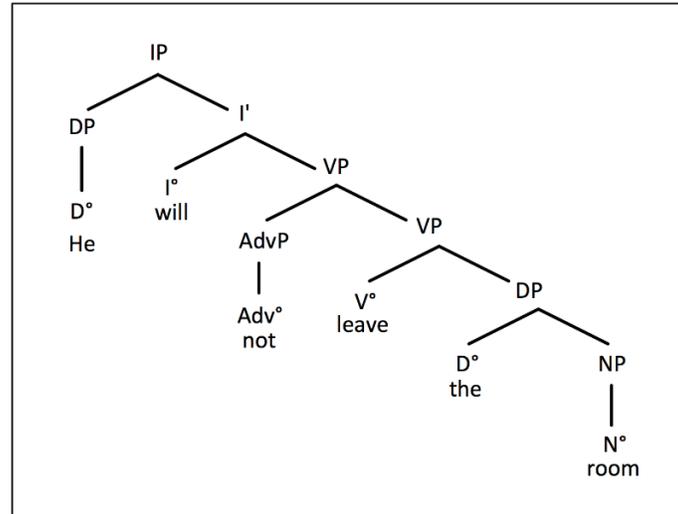
Figure 1: Example of a Present-Day English clause with SVO constituent order

The fact that Present-Day English is classified as having SVO as its basic constituent order, does however not mean, that every single clause in Present-Day English follow this order. The basic constituent order of a language is basic in the sense that it is regarded as the underlying order, but other constituent orders are possible as well but are thus viewed upon as variations from the basic constituent order (Fischer et al. 2001, 146). These variations can be a result of different forms of movement within the clause. Consider for example the main clause interrogative wh-question *Which book has Julia actually read?*
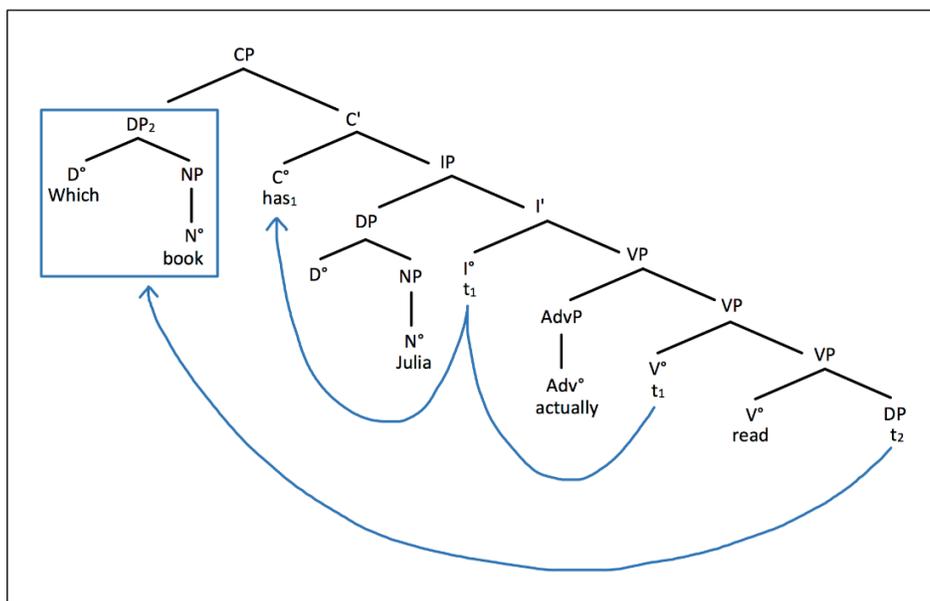
Figure 2: Example of a Present-Day English clause with an OSV surface order

At first glance, this type of clause has another structure than the typical Present-Day English SVO clause structure. Both subject-auxiliary inversion and wh-fronting have been applied to the sentence, resulting in an Object Subject Verb (OSV) order. But if we look at the underlying order of the clause before any rules or raisings were applied, we find the deep structure of the clause (Hudson 2000, 300). Pretending that no subject-auxiliary inversion or wh-fronting had been applied to this clause, it becomes clear that the deep structure of this interrogative question is SVO, and that the OSV order is just the surface structure of the clause.

Although the surface structure can confuse the picture, many languages, including those mentioned above, have SVO as their basic constituent order. According to Russell Tomlin (1986, 22), this applies to 42% of the world's languages. In the following section, I will account for why Old Norse, the extinct language of the Vikings, can be said to be a language of this kind.

3.2 Why Old Norse is an SVO language

When the first Scandinavian migrants arrived on the northeastern coast of England, they brought with them a whole new culture and a new language completely foreign to the Anglo-Saxons. The language was Old Norse. The now extinct language was in many ways similar to the modern-day Scandinavian languages such as Danish, Norwegian and Swedish – and in particular modern Icelandic which resembles Old Norse to such an extent that Icelandic linguists including Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson and Halldór Ármann Sigurðssson have judged them to be variants of the same language (Haugan 2000, 3). Just like its modern-day counterparts, Old Norse is typically classified as being an SVO language with an underlying Subject Verb Object order. Consider the following two examples from *Heimskringla: Noregs konunga sögur:*

1) *Hon skyldi bera ǫl víkingum*
   She should carry ale vikings
   "She was to bring ale to the Vikings" (Emonds and Faarlund 2014, 62)

2) *Hon hefir mint mik þeira hluta*
   She has reminded me those things
   "She has reminded me of those things" (Emonds and Faarlund 2014, 62)

These two clauses exhibit almost the same constituent order. They both have a subject in initial position, then an auxiliary verb followed by a main verb, and in both clauses the objects are in final position – in sentence 1 the direct object precedes the indirect object while in sentence 2 the indirect object precedes the direct object. Both clauses exhibit a clear SVO structure, and if we were to base Old Norse constituent order on clauses like these alone, there would be no doubt that Old Norse was an SVO language. Unfortunately, things are not so simple. As seen in the Present-Day English example above, different clauses within the same language can have different constituent orders. Despite of Present-Day English being an SVO language, Present-Day English clauses can still exhibit other surface structures. The same applies to Old Norse that exhibits a great amount of constituent order variation in its clauses.

3.2.1 Variation in Old Norse constituent order

In the above section, we saw two Old Norse clauses exhibiting SVO order. Consider now the following Old Norse clause from *Laxdæla Saga*:

3) *Ekki mun eg þenna mann séð hafa*
   Not will I this man seen have
   "I believe I have not seen this man" (Haugan 2000, 22)

This clause has a modal auxiliary verb in second position, followed by the subject, then the object and in the two final positions it has the main verb and finally an auxiliary verb. Since Old Norse is restricted by the Verb Second (V2) rule, it needs to have a verb in second position, in this case a modal auxiliary. Despite of this auxiliary verb, the clause can be said to have a typical SOV constituent structure, since the main verb *séð* 'seen' appears in final position only followed by an auxiliary verb, which is a characteristic of SOV constituent order (see figure 3). Based on the difference between the constituent order in sentence 1 and 2 and the constituent order in sentence 3, we can establish that Old Norse clauses could have both SVO and SOV constituent order. Following the ideas of the Icelandic linguist Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson, Jens Haugan (2000, 22) claims that Old Norse clauses could exhibit further two constituent structures, meaning that there were actually four possible constituent orders in Old Norse. As seen in figure 3 below these were VO and OV and then the two mixed constituent orders OV+VO and VO+OV.

'Pure' VO	finite verb	auxiliary	main verb	object
'Pure' OV	finite verb	object	main verb	auxiliary
'Mixed' (OV + VO)	finite verb	main verb	auxiliary	object
'Mixed' (VO + OV)	finite verb	object	auxiliary	main verb

Figure 3: The four possible constituent order varieties in Old Norse (Haugan 2000, 24)

With four different possible constituent orders and a situation as unclear as this, why is Old Norse then considered to be an SVO language?

3.2.2 Argument that Old Norse has SVO as its deep structure

In order to determine the basic constituent order of a given language, one has to find the order "from which all other occurring orders can be derived in the least complex way" (Vikner 2019, 439). To decide the basic constituent order of Old Norse, I will follow Halldór Ármann Sigurðsson (1988, 23) in imagining not four, but two possible deep structures of Old Norse – (S)OV and (S)VO. But which of the two deep structures are most favorable in order to have the least possible constituent movements? If we assume the basic constituent order of Old Norse to be (S)OV, then the surface (S)VO structure would be obtained by V-to-I movement and rightward movement of the object e.g. Heavy NP-shift (see figure 4). However, since Extraposition or Heavy NP-shift of indirect objects are not a common phenomenon in Germanic languages, it seems rather dubious that Old Norse should allow these types of movements (Haugan 2000, 45). However, if we assume that Old Norse had (S)VO as its basic constituent order, the surface (S)OV structure would then be obtained by leftward movement of the object (see figure 4). Haugan (2000, 46) argues: "Since all Modern Scandinavian languages are clearly SVO, and since those languages also allow variants of Object Shift, i.e. movement of an object to the left into the middle field, it is most reasonable to claim that Old Norse has SVO as its one and only basic word order. If Old Norse allowed leftward movement like the Modern Scandinavian languages, there was no 'need' for two basic word orders".

Basic OV order
+ VO by transformations
(V-to-I and rightward
movement of the object
e.g. Heavy NP-Shift)

Basic VO order
+ OV by transformations
(leftward movement of
the object)

Figure 4: The two possible basic constituent orders of Old Norse
(Sigurðsson 1988, 23)

It thus seems like an attractive conclusion to select SVO as the basic constituent order of Old Norse, since fewer movements are necessary, and the movements that are necessary to explain the variation are also allowed in modern-day Scandinavian. For this reason, I will argue that Old Norse is an SVO language and that the other three possible constituent orders are just surface structures derived from SVO deep structure by leftward movement of the object. These three other possible constituent orders are often viewed as 'remnants' of the SOV structure that existed in Ancient Nordic – the predecessor of Old Norse (Haugan 2000, 28). However, it is beyond the scope of this article to investigate this change further.

3.3 What characterizes an SOV language?

An SOV language is a language where the basic constituent order is Subject Object Verb. This constituent order is very common among the world's languages. According to Tomlin (1986, 22), it is the most common clause structure in the world with 45% of the world's languages having this structure. The modern-day variants of languages like Hindi, Japanese and Korean all have SOV as their deep structure. The same goes for Present-Day German, however, German also has V2, which makes the picture somewhat complicated. An example of a German clause can be found in figure 5:
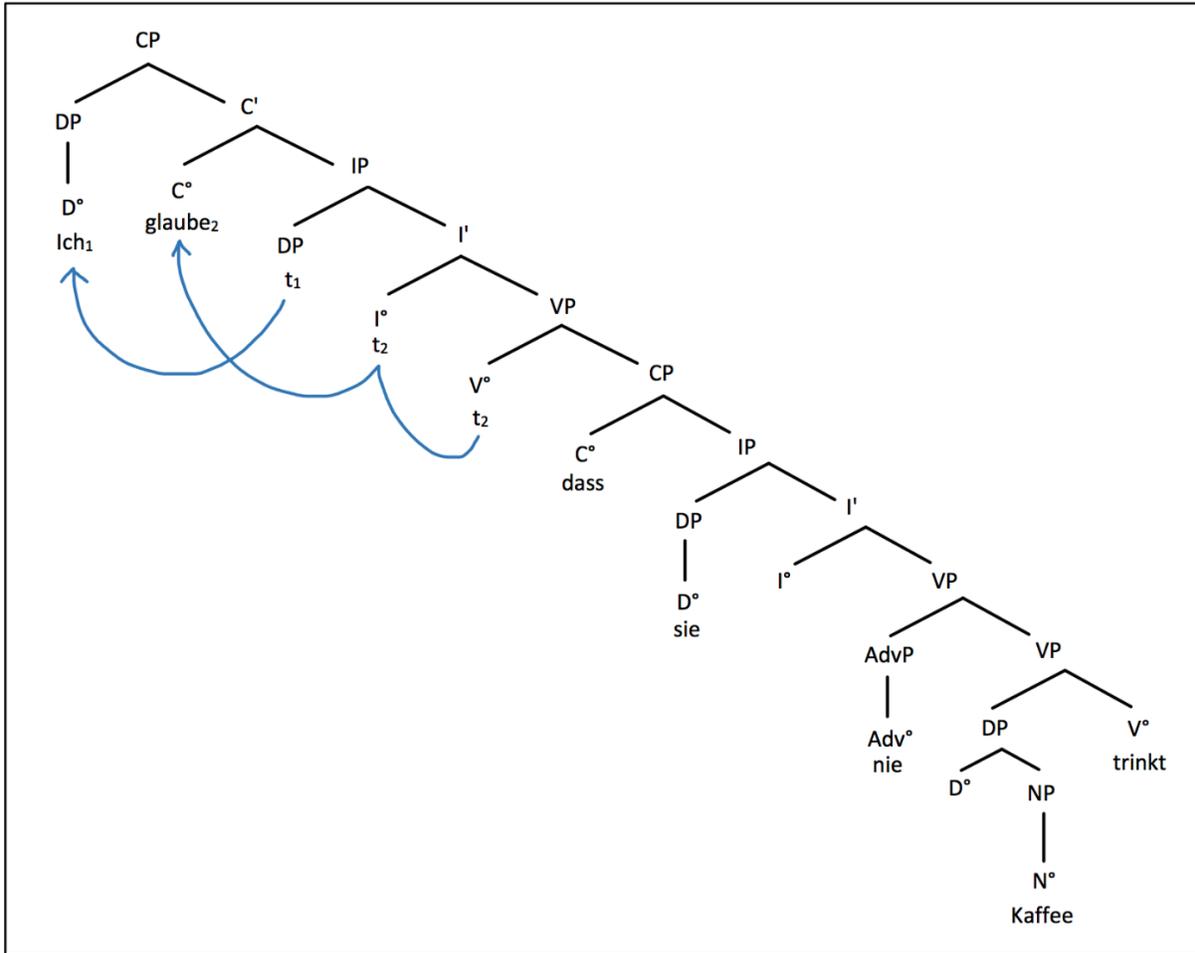
Figure 5: Example of a Present-Day German clause

The German clause in figure 5 consists of a main clause with an embedded clause inside. It is the embedded clause that is of most interest since it has pure SOV structure. However, the SOV structure can also be seen in German main clauses, but because German have V2, simple main clauses containing only a main verb are often mistaken as having SVO order. Consider for example the following main clause: *Er hält einen Vortrag* 'he gives a talk', which appears to have SVO constituent order. However, as soon as the present perfect tense auxiliary *hat* 'has' is added to the clause, the SOV structure becomes obvious, since the main verb then appears in final position: *Er hat einen Vortrag gehalten* 'he has a talk given' (Vikner 2019, 440). Other languages such as Hindi and Japanese are more consistent in their SOV constituent structure because they are not affected by V2.

3.4 Why Old English is an SOV language

Old English is often said to be the earliest historical form of the English language, and it was this language that the Vikings faced when they arrived in England in 787 A.D. Old English is in many ways different from the English language that we know today – one of the main differences being that Old English was an SOV language according to most generative accounts, whereas Present-Day English, of course, is an SVO language (Pintzuk 1996, 241). Another phenomenon distinguishing Old English from Present-Day English is V2. It is a well-known fact that Present-Day English has lost most of its V2, but in Old English V2 order was still common (although not obligatory), making its clause structure resemble Present-Day German (Kroch, Taylor and Ringe 2001, 5). As we saw above, the SOV structure of Present-Day German is most obvious in embedded clauses. The same goes for Old English, that exhibits pure SOV in its embedded clauses. Consider the following example from *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England,* where the main verb appears in final position right after the direct and indirect object:

4) …*þæt he se papa æðelbyrhte þam cyninge gewrit & gyfe sende*

...that he the pope æthelbirgh the king letters and gifts sent

"...that he, the pope, sent letters and gifts to Æthelbriht, the king" (Trips 2002, 76)

However, just like in Present-Day German the SOV constituent structure can also be seen in main clauses in Old English. Consider the following example from *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care:*

5) *He ne mæg his agene aberan*

He not may his own support

"He may not support his own" (Pintzuk 1996, 245)

Despite the fact that the clause is constricted by V2 forcing a verb to appear in second position (like in most other Old English clauses), the SOV structure is seen clearly because the main verb *aberan* 'support' appears in final position after the object.

SOV structure can thus be found in both main clauses and embedded clauses, giving the impression that Old English can be categorized as an SOV language. However, just like in Old Norse,

there is a great amount of constituent order variation in Old English which confuses the picture slightly. This will be discussed briefly in the following section.

3.4.1 Variation in Old English constituent order

Consider the following example of an Old English main clause with a different clause structure than seen above:

6) *Se wolde gelytlian þone lyfigendan hælend*
   He would diminish the living lord
   "He would diminish the living lord" (Pintzuk and Taylor 2006, 249)

The structure of this clause resembles Present-Day English clause structure, since it has a typical SVO constituent order with the subject in initial position, followed by first the auxiliary verb, then the main verb and finally the object. It is thus seen that Old English clauses can exhibit both SOV and SVO order. According to Fischer et al. (2001, 139) this variation in constituent order can be explained by the fact that the order of object and verb was considerably freer in Old English than it is in Present-Day English. With such a free constituent order, how can it be assumed that Old English has SOV as its basic constituent order?

3.4.2 Argument that Old English has SOV as its deep structure

Following the principles of generative syntax, I assume that all languages have one, and only one, basic constituent order. Variations on that order are regarded as derived from the underlying order (Fischer et al. 2001, 145-146). As it has been established in the above section, there are two possible constituent orders of Old English, namely SOV and SVO. Consider figure 6 where the SOV order is seen in a) and the SVO order is seen in b).
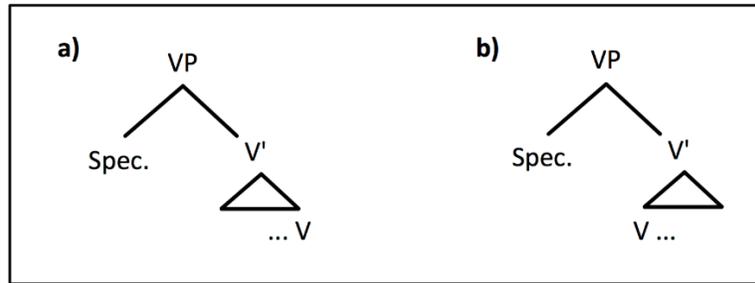
Figure 6: The two possible constituent orders of Old English
(Fischer et al. 2001, 146)

The question is thus, from which of the two orders we can derive the other occurring order in the least complex way. If we first take SVO to be the underlying order of Old English, the assumption would be that the constituents of the VP (Verb Phrase) are base-generated postverbally (see figure 6). Those surface patterns where the VP constituents precede the main verb should then be derivable by motivating leftward movement rules (149). If we then take SOV to be the underlying order, the assumption would be that the constituents of the VP are base-generated in preverbal position (see figure 6). Those surface orders where VP constituents follow the main verb should be derivable by motivating rightward movement rules. One of the strongest pieces of evidence in favor of SOV as the underlying order is the fact that some constituents always must occur preverbally in Old English. These are personal pronouns, stranded prepositions, particles, negative *ne* 'not' and some types of adverbs (147). If SOV is regarded as the underlying order, one is absolved from having to come up with a rationale for preposing these various constituents (147).

Another reason why it makes sense to select SOV as the basic constituent order of Old English is that the predecessor of Old English, Proto-Germanic, was also an SOV language (Sigurðsson 1988, 18). The same goes for languages such as Dutch, Frisian, German, Afrikaans and Swabian – all West Germanic languages that have SOV as their basic constituent order (Vikner 2019, 443). It thus seems like the most attractive conclusion to choose SOV as the basic constituent order of Old English. Pintzuk (1996, 246) states that: "It should be pointed out that an OV grammar with optional rules of V2 (…) is quite powerful and can derive many different surface word orders". We thus take SOV to be the basic constituent order of Old English and all other constituent orders found within Old English to be surface structures derived from SOV underlying order because of the V2 constraint.

4 History of English constituent order

4.1 Historical development of constituent order in English

As argued above Old English is most often looked upon as being an SOV language, whereas Present-Day English, of course, is an SVO language. With that in place, the question that arises is when this change from SOV constituent order to SVO constituent order happened, and how it is possible for such a shift to happen within a language?

No matter how the change in constituent order is explained, scholars seem to agree that the change happened between 1150 and 1350 A.D. in the transition from Old English to Middle English (Trips 2002, 2). Like other major syntactic changes, the loss of SOV order in English involved a lengthy period of structured variation, in which the two grammatical options (SOV clauses and SVO clauses) were used by individual speakers (Pintzuk and Taylor 2006, 249). SOV thus remained possible throughout the Middle English period as well, despite of Middle English having SVO order as its basic constituent order (Fischer et al. 2001, 139). Consider for example the following three clauses – the first from Old English, the second from Early Middle English and the third from Late Middle English:

7) *…ond he his feorh generede, ond þeah he wæs oft gewundad*
   ...and he his life saved and yet he was often wounded
   "...and he saved his life, although he was often wounded" (Fischer et al. 2001, 138)

8) *Hi hadden him manred maked and athes sworen, ac hi nan treuthe ne holden*
   They had him homage done and oaths sworn but they no truth not kept
   "They had done him homage and sworn oaths of allegiance to him, but they did not keep their word" (Fischer et al. 2001, 138)

9) *If so be that thou ne mayst nat thyn owene conseil hyde, how darstou preyen any oother wight thy conseil secrely to kepe?*
   If so be that you not can not your own counsel hide how dare-you ask any other person your counsel secret to keep?
   "If it is the case that you cannot hide your own counsel, how could you dare to ask anyone else to keep your counsel secret?" (Fischer et al. 2001, 138)

These three clauses all exhibit SOV order including the ones from Early Middle English and Late Middle English, which would otherwise have SVO as their basic constituent order. This shows us that there was a great amount of variation and optionality in the use of constituent orders in the transitioning from Old English to Middle English (Pintzuk and Taylor 2006, 249-250). Early Middle English, the language spoken in the time period from 1150 to 1350 A.D., was thus a transitional language with two competing grammars, the SVO grammar eventually winning out over the SOV grammar (Trips 2002, 1). In the following figure, we see how SOV went from being the most common constituent order in Old English to being considerably rare in Late Middle English.

Underlying rate of OV order by period

Period	Underlying frequency of OV order (%)
OE1 (before 950)	66,7
OE2 (after 950)	59,3
ME1 (1150 - 1250)	33,4
ME2 (1250 - 1350)	3,6
ME3 (1350 - 1420)	1,5
ME4 (1420 - 1500)	0,8

Figure 7: Underlying rate of OV order by period
(Pintzuk and Taylor 2006, 267)

The gradual decrease in the use of SOV constituent order is seen clearly in figure 7, and according to the table almost all use of SOV order had died out in the Late Middle English period. However, according to Pintzuk and Taylor (2006, 139), the SOV constituent order was still productive after the Late Middle English period, being used in prose writings until the sixteenth century and in verse well into the nineteenth century. Not only did the SOV order continue after the Early Middle English period, the modern order, SVO, can also be found before the start of the Early Middle English period as seen in sentence 6 above. This is also backed up by figure 7, which shows that only 66,7% of the Old English clauses had SOV as their underlying order, meaning that as much as 33,3% of the Old English clauses had other constituent orders than SOV. This is a considerably high number considering the fact that Old English is presumed to be an SOV language. The development from SOV to SVO

thus seems to be much more gradual than often suggested, beginning way before the Early Middle English period (139).

4.2 How is it possible for constituent order to change?

According to Croft (2002, 232): "Languages do not occur in static or stable states. All languages exhibit some degree of grammatical variation, and they change over time; in fact, much synchronic variation represents language change in progress". So, when we see as much constituent order variation as we did at the end of the Old English period (see figure 7 above) it most probably is a sign of an approaching constituent order change. Faarlund (1985, 367) proposes 'the principle of diachronic change' which says: "A change from F_p to F_q cannot take place unless F_p and F_q can coexist as alternatives in a language". Thus, according to Faarlund's principle, SOV and SVO order must have been co-existing at some point in English (as we have already determined earlier in this article), since this is a requirement for this kind of syntactic change to happen. When both constructions are frequent, and when they are generated by the same speaker, then the two constructions must somehow carry out different pragmatic functions and the speaker's choice of one of them over the other is thus pragmatically determined (367). Faarlund (1985, 159) explains how the SOV constituent order can be lost because of these pragmatic differences: "As it becomes common to move a focused element to the end of the sentence, the language develops two possible utterance forms, SOV and SVO. [The two constituent orders are] related by a transformation that is sensitive to pragmatic factors telling the speaker whether or not to focus the object. Because the object is the most frequently focused sentence element, the SVO order will soon be conceived of as the unmarked form, and subsequently through restructuring it also becomes the underlying form. This is the end of SOV order". According to Faarlund, this is how constituent order changes can happen, and arguably this was the process that took place, as English developed from being an SOV language into being an SVO language.

Why then did English develop from being an SOV language into being an SVO language and not one of the other possible constituent orders? Gell-Mann and Ruhlen (2011, 17295) state that in the majority of known cases, the direction of change has been almost uniformly SOV > SVO. Vennemann (1973, 40) supports Gell-Mann and Ruhlen in their claim and proposes the following figure demonstrating the possible directions that constituent orders can develop in.
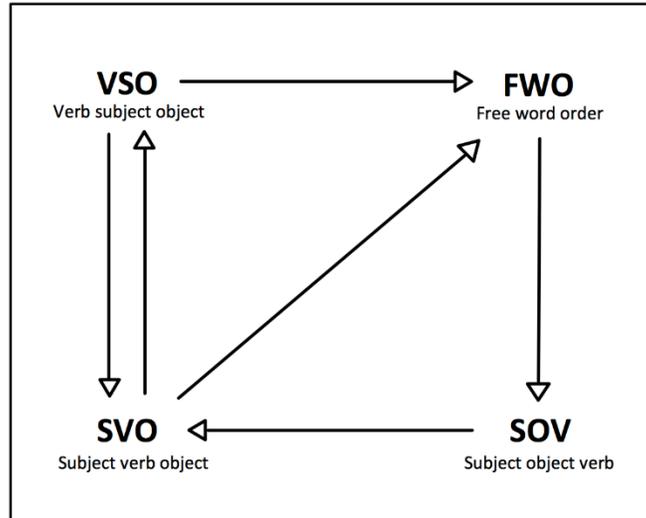
Figure 8: Possible constituent order changes
(Vennemann 1973, 40)

According to Vennemann (1973, 40), a language that has SOV as its basic constituent order can only develop in one direction, namely in the direction of SVO. If this is correct, Old English would indeed be expected to develop into an SVO language rather than into any of the other constituent orders.

5 Old Norse influence on English constituent order

As mentioned in the previous section there is broad agreement among scholars that the change from SOV to SVO in English happened between 1150 and 1350 A.D. This period however does not coincide with the era of Scandinavian influence, which lasted from 787 to 1041 A.D. and thus ended over 100 years before the constituent order change began. With the years not indicating any connection between the two events, how is it possible to argue that Old Norse influence was the reason for this major syntactic change in English? In order to account for this, I will now consider the extensive amount of other borrowings from Old Norse into the English language.

5.1 Borrowings from Old Norse into the English language

The linguistic effects of the mixing between the two cultures and languages was extensive which is evident from the amount of borrowings from Scandinavian into the English language (Trips 2002, 65). When first considering Old Norse impact on English, the many vocabulary items borrowed into the English language jump into mind. Nouns such as *egg*, *freckle* and *fog* are all derived from Old Norse and came to replace their English counterparts (*OED* 2019, s.v. *egg*, *freckle*, *fog*). Especially nouns belonging

to the field of warfare or nouns belonging to the field of law such as *law* and *outlaw* were borrowed from Old Norse, indicating in which areas of the English society the Scandinavians had the most impact (Trips 2002, 12). A lot of Old Norse proper nouns also came to have a significant importance in the English language. As mentioned earlier, Old Norse family names with the patronymic *-son* became common and are still seen in Present-Day English in some of the most frequently used family names in the UK such as *Johnson*, *Wilson* and *Thompson*. Furthermore, many of the English towns and settlements were renamed with Old Norse names after the arrival of the Scandinavians. Typically, the Scandinavian place names were made up with Old Norse suffixes such as *-by* 'town', *-thorp* 'village' and *-toft* 'land' (10). More than 1400 of these Scandinavian place names have survived into Present-Day English and can be found everywhere in the area previously settled by Scandinavians thus primarily in the northeastern part of England (see appendix 1 where the black dots indicate Scandinavian place names) (10). Consider for example town names such as *Whitby, Grimsby, Linthorpe, Mablethorpe, Lowestoft* and *Scraptoft* – all surviving place names from the Scandinavian Era. Apart from nouns and proper nouns, English also adopted adverbs such as *aloft* and *athwart*, prepositions such as *till* and *fro* (12), adjectives such as *odd* and *low*, as well as verbs such as *call* and *die* (Emonds and Faarlund 2014, 50). Old English almost certainly already had words for all of the above-mentioned concepts before the arrival of the Scandinavians (50). Yet the English speakers decided to use the Old Norse loans giving up the Old English words previously used.

However, it was not only open-class lexical items that were borrowed into the English language but also closed-class function items (Trips 2002, 65). In the transition to Middle English the Old English third person plural pronouns *hīe*, *heora* and *him* were abandoned and replaced by *they*, *their* and *them* – originating in the Old Norse third person plural pronouns *þeir, þeim* and *þeira* (Curzan 1996, 302). The number of items borrowed into the English vocabulary from Old Norse is thus fairly big and the above-mentioned examples are only a few out of many. It should be mentioned that the discussed examples are all Old Norse loans that have survived into the Present-Day English lexicon. Many more words of Old Norse origin existed in the Old English and Middle English vocabularies, but were replaced by French words after the Norman Conquest (Trips 2002, 12). Examples of such Old Norse words are *cnearr* 'small warship', *scegþ* 'vessel', and *batswegen* 'boatman' (12). Considering the many Old Norse words borrowed into the English vocabulary – both those words that have survived into Present-Day English as well as those that have died out – we see that the Old Norse influence on the English vocabulary was intense. Strengthening this claim is the fact that English already had words for almost all of the Old Norse borrowings, indicating that Old Norse influence must have been strong

enough to push aside the English words in order to make the Old Norse borrowings the commonly used ones.

That Old Norse had excessive influence on the English language is furthermore supported by the borrowing of Old Norse grammar, a field within language that is otherwise relatively stable (Trips 2002, 13). It was the influence of Old Norse that lead to the reduction of the number of distinct person/number agreement endings on the finite verbs (65-66). Beginning in the north, English changed its present tense endings in all persons and numbers (except from first person singular, which had *-e*) to *-(e)s* which corresponds to the Modern Scandinavian *-er* ending (66). According to Trips (2002, 66): "This represents a simplification as opposed to the Old English (…) system which shows *-e, -(e)s(t), -(e)th* in the three persons of the singular and *–(a)th* in all persons of the plural".

Syntax-wise, several operations typical of Old Norse became visible in the English language, as the constituent order changed from SOV to SVO. Among them were stylistic fronting, a fronting operation resembling topicalization, where past participles, adjectives, adverbs, particles and other similar categories are moved to what looks like the subject position in finite sentences (Holmberg 2006, 532). Consider the following clause from the northern English text *Ormulum* written in Middle English:

10) *...wiþþ all þatt lac þatt offredd wass biforenn Christess come...*

    ...with all that sacrifice that offered was before Christ's come...

    "...with all of the sacrifice that was offered before Christ's come..." (Trips 2002, 306)

Here the past particle *offredd* 'offered' is fronted, indicating that stylistic fronting has taken place. Since stylistic fronting is a characteristic of North Germanic rather than West Germanic (Kroch and Taylor 2000, 139), it seems likely that it was borrowed into the English language from Old Norse. According to Kroch, Taylor and Ringe (2001, 15) stylistic fronting can be found in all dialects of Middle English, not only in the northern ones, indicating that the influence of Old Norse was intense.

Another syntactic characteristic of Old Norse in English is found when considering the V2 phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, Present-Day English has lost most of its V2, but in the Middle English period, English still exhibited V2. Consider for example the following clause from the Middle English *Vices and Virtues*, where the main verb appears in second position right after the DP *Ðese hali mihte* 'this holy power':

11) *Ðese hali mihte forleas Dauið kyng*

> This holy power lost David King
>
> "King David lost this holy power" (Trips 2002, 248)

What is especially interesting about Middle English V2 is that two different types of V2 were used simultaneously – namely CP-V2 and IP-V2. The two types of V2 differ with respect to the placement of the tensed verb, i.e. they place the tensed verb in two different positions (Kroch, Taylor and Ringe 2001, 2). In CP-V2 languages, V2 constituent order results from transformational movement of the verb from its underlying position as head of the Verb Phrase (VP) to the Complementizer (C°) position, with concomitant movement of some phrasal constituent to the specifier of the Complementizer Phrase (Spec, CP) (2). In IP-V2 languages on the other hand, V2 constituent order is the result of movement of the tensed verb to a lower position – namely INFL (I°) (2). The two different types of V2 are found within different dialects of Middle English: the northern dialects exhibited CP-V2, which is also known as the Scandinavian type of V2, whereas the southern dialects exhibited IP-V2, the type of V2 which is also found in Old English (Trips 2002, 224). It seems logical that the V2 pattern of Old English would have continued into the Middle English period as it did in the southern dialects, so how come the northern dialects have another type of V2? Trips (2002, 260) explains the foreign V2 pattern of the northern dialects in the following way: "As the language of the Scandinavian invaders must have exhibited the V2 phenomenon (it was a CP-V2 language with CP-recursion), the assumption that the syntactic operation was borrowed from them seems to be plausible". The distinct type of V2 found in the northern dialects of Middle English is thus another example of the extensive amount of borrowings from Old Norse into the English language.

5.2 Thomason and Kaufman's (1988) scale of influence

Thomason and Kaufman (1988, 74-76) introduce the following borrowing scale in order to explain the different degrees of language contact:

Borrowing scale

(1) Casual contact:
Lexical borrowing of non-basic content words.

(2) Slightly more intense contact:
Lexical borrowing of conjunctions and adverbial particles. Minor phonological borrowings but only in loanwords.

(3) More intense contact:
Lexical borrowing of prepositions, pronouns and numerals. Derivational affixes are borrowed and added to native words. Phoneme inventory can be afftected. In syntax, a complete change from SOV to SVO syntax will not occur here, but a few aspects of such a switch may be found at this stage.

(4) Strong cultural pressure:
Major structural changes in syllable structure or word order. Inflectional affixes are borrowed and added to native words.

(5) Very strong cultural pressure:
Major changes to the typology such as the change from prefixing to suffixing.

Figure 9: Thomason and Kaufman's borrowing scale (Adapted from Thomason and Kaufman 1988, 74-76)

Comparing the borrowings from Old Norse discussed in the previous section to Thomason and Kaufman's (1988) scale, we see that Old Norse indeed had a significant impact on the English language. The borrowing of Old Norse nouns, proper nouns, adjectives and verbs into English only indicate casual language contact on stage 1, but if we consider the borrowing of prepositions and pronouns, however, Thomason and Kaufman's (1988) scale suggests more intense language contact on stage 3. Finally, the borrowing of inflectional suffixes, stylistic fronting and Scandinavian V2 indicate strong cultural pressure on stage 4. English grammar was thus affected by the language contact with Old Norse despite of grammar being a relatively stable field within language that rarely changes (Fisiak 2010, 331). If Old Norse could influence so many parameters within the English language, it seems plausible that it could also have influenced other things – for example English constituent order, resulting in a change from SOV to SVO. This argument will be discussed further in the following section.

5.3 Why Old Norse impact was the reason for the English constituent order change

If we consider the intense co-existence of the English and the Scandinavians and the intermingling of cultures and languages that it resulted in, we see a contact situation where the influence of the invader's language was strong. According to Trips (2002, 331), the Old Norse influence could very well have been strong enough to trigger a syntactic change in the English language such as the change in constituent order from SOV to SVO. As we saw above in Thomason and Kaufman's (1988) borrowing scale, constituent order is a relatively stable element of language, and it takes a strong cultural pressure for it to change (see figure 9). Many elements of language are borrowed more easily than constituent order, and because of that we can assume that if Scandinavian impact was the reason for the constituent order change, we should be able to find further trace of Old Norse in the syntax of English at that time (Trips 2002, 331). As discussed in section 5.1 English has borrowed an immense number of Old Norse characteristics, and traces of Old Norse can thus be found within Middle English lexicon and morphology but most importantly also within its syntax in the form of Scandinavian V2 and stylistic fronting. Together with the fact that many of these characteristics happened quicker in the northern dialects (or in some cases only in the northern dialects), it backs up the claim that the change from SOV to SVO could very well have happened due to language contact with Old Norse.

Another argument supporting the claim that Old Norse was the reason for the change in English constituent order can be found when comparing Middle English texts from the East and Northeast Midlands (previously known as Danelaw) to Middle English texts from the Southeastern Midlands. Just as with the V2 phenomenon discussed previously, the dialects behave differently with respect to underlying constituent order. The texts from the East and Northeast Midlands show a higher frequency of underlying SVO order than the texts from the Southeastern Midlands (117). In the texts from the East and Northeast Midlands analyzed by Trips (2002, 106) as much as 55% of the pronominal objects appear in postverbal position, and there is thus unambiguous evidence of underlying SVO order. Consider for example the following embedded clause from the northeastern text *Ormulum,* which has a clear SVO order:

12) ...*þatt Drihhtin shollde gifenn uss god sawless eȝhesihhþe*
    ...that the Lord should give us good soul's eye sight
    "...that the Lord should give us good soul's eyesight" (Trips 2002, 111)

In the texts from the Southeast Midlands, on the other hand, it is only 10% of the pronominal objects that appear in postverbal position (106). According to Trips (2002, 117): "A likely reason why we find a higher frequency of underlying VO order in texts from those areas which were within the Danelaw and hence densely settled with Scandinavians is that the Scandinavian language had a strong influence on the English language spoken there, i.e. the underlying VO word order pattern was introduced into the language by Scandinavian". The SVO constituent order is thus thought to have been borrowed into the English language because of the extensive amount of Scandinavian speaking settlers in the northeastern England and later, after the Norman Conquest and after the two cultures had merged further, the "northern dialect" with SVO constituent order spread to the south and west eventually becoming dominant in all of England (Emonds and Faarlund 2014, 63).

6 Conclusion

It is a well-known fact that the basic constituent order of English changed from SOV to SVO as Old English transitioned into Middle English. The change from SOV to SVO did not happen overnight – instead it happened gradually and involved a lengthy period of structured variation, where the two grammatical options were used by individual speakers. The SVO order became more and more common, and by the Late Middle English period the SOV order was almost completely gone.

What is, however, not so well-known is what caused this major change in English syntax. This question has long been a topic of discussion among scholars, but despite of the immense number of books and journal articles published on the topic, scholars still seem to disagree giving different reasons for the change. In this article, it has been argued that the language contact with Old Norse, the language of the Vikings, was the reason for the change in English constituent order. Looking at the historical facts, we see that Scandinavian supremacy did not coincide with the Early Middle English period, where the change in constituent order is thought to have happened. However, despite of this, there are several indications that the reason for the change in constituent order is still to be found in the heavy influence of Old Norse. As has been argued in this article, the now extinct North Germanic language, Old Norse, had SVO as its basic constituent order just like the modern-day variants of the Scandinavian languages. Old Norse is thus thought to have influenced English to abandon its SOV constituent order and instead adopt the Old Norse SVO constituent order. However, as seen in Thomason and Kaufman's (1988) borrowing scale, it takes a strong cultural pressure for a language to give up its own constituent order and adopt a foreign one, and if this was the case with English, we should be able to find further trace of Old Norse in the English language at that time. As seen in

section 5.1 it is indeed possible to find Old Norse characteristics in Middle English texts. Not only did English borrow open-class lexical items such as nouns, proper nouns, adverbs, prepositions, adjectives and verbs from Old Norse, English also borrowed closed-class function items such as the Old Norse third person plural pronouns *they*, *their* and *them*, abandoning their own Old English *hīe*, *heora* and *him*. Apart from introducing new words into the English lexicon, Old Norse also influenced English grammar. Under the influence of Old Norse, English reduced its person/number agreement endings on finite verbs, adopted stylistic fronting and some dialects of English even adopted the Scandinavian type of V2 replacing the Old English V2. If Old Norse could have such a great impact on English grammar, an otherwise very stable field within language, it could also have influenced the constituent order of English, explaining the constituent order shift as an extreme case of language contact. Many of the above-mentioned characteristics borrowed from Old Norse appeared earlier in the northern English dialects than in the southern English dialects, and in some cases, the characteristics only appeared in the northern dialects. The same phenomenon is seen in the case of the constituent order change. When comparing Middle English texts from the two dialects, it becomes clear that the northeastern dialect shows a much higher frequency of underlying SVO than the southern dialect. The fact that so many Old Norse characteristics can be found within the English language together with the fact that all of these characteristics including the change from SOV to SVO happened earlier in the northeastern England, the area that were dominated by Scandinavians for more than 200 years, back up the claim that the change from SOV to SVO could very well have happened due to language contact with Old Norse.

7 Appendixes

Appendix 1: Map of the Scandinavian Kingdom in England (Emonds and Faarlund 2014, 33).

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