

Word Order Determinants in Old English Poetry: The Case for Alliteration

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In the paper I presented at the ICEHL 12 (the Twelfth International Conference on English Historical Linguistics held at the University of Glasgow in August 2002), I discussed factors affecting the word order of the modal auxiliary (M) and its infinitive complement, a non-finite verb (V) in the subordinate clauses of Old English verse, *Beowulf*. Although previous theories, identifying extra elements (Ohkado 2000) or ‘heaviness’ (such as Kohonen 1978, Suzuki 1994, Davis 1997) as dictating the word order, seem valid when applied to Old English prose, the results indicated instead that alliteration is in fact the crucial factor in determining the MV/VM word order in subordinate clauses of Old English verse.

Thus, the VM order is always observed when only the non-finite verb alliterates, and both appear within the same half-line boundary, as in (1), while the MV order is always observed either when the alliteration pattern differs from the above or when both are separated by a half-line boundary, as in (2).

- (1) \boxed{V} M order þæt he lytel fær longgestreona
 that he a littel while the long-held treasure
brucan **moste**. (Beorh eallgears) (*Beowulf* 2240-1a)
 enjoy might
 ‘that he might a little while enjoy the long-held treasure’

(In quotations, modal auxiliaries are in boldface; non-finite verbs are underlined; alliteration are indicated by the symbol of a boxed \boxed{M} or \boxed{V})

- (2) \boxed{M} V order þæt hie ne moste (þa Metod nolde)
 that them not might (when the Ruler did not wish (it))
 se s[c]ynscaþa under sceadu bregdan (*Beowulf* 706-7)
 the evil-doer beneath the shadows drag away
 ‘that (when the Ruler did not wish it) the evil-doer might not
 drag them away beneath the shadows’

Furthermore, this phenomenon can also generally be observed in main clauses, except for cases where only the non-finite verb alliterates in main clauses of ‘a’-verse, predominantly resulting in the MV order.

In this latest paper I seek to apply this theory regarding the importance of alliteration in determining word order across a more comprehensive corpus of Old English verse and a wider variety of auxiliary types:

- (a) modal constructions
- (b) participle constructions
- (c) infinitive constructions

This paper thus attempts to verify whether the tendencies observed in *Beowulf* can also be discerned in the other texts, pointing to their applicability to Old English verse as a whole. The results indicate that alliteration is far more important than either extra elements or 'heaviness' in determining word order of all types of auxiliary verbs and their dependant verbals in Old English verse.