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Crossing the Borders between Meter, Syntax and Information Structure Some Methodological Notes

Chiara De Bastiani

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia (<chiara.debastiani@unive.it>)

Abstract

This paper discusses how combining research in meter, syntax and information structure can enhance our understanding of the syntax of a given historical text and help provide insights into the relation between metrical prominence and information structure. The contribution illustrates two case studies conducted on historical English texts: the Old English *Beowulf* and the Early Middle English *Ormulum*. I argue that integrating an investigation of meter into the study of both information structure and syntax can refine the methodological tools available to the historical linguist and philologist.

Keywords: Early Middle English, Information Structure, Meter, Old English, Syntax

Introduction

With this paper, I present two case studies aimed at highlighting the advantages of crossing the borders between metrical studies, linguistics and pragmatics, in order to enrich the set of methodological approaches to historical texts. Two medieval English texts are investigated: the Old English (henceforth OE) text of *Beowulf* and the Early Middle English (henceforth EME) text of the *Ormulum*. Both texts are poetic compositions, but they are deeply different from one another, in language, metrical structure, and reception (see Section 1). They are, however, relevant for our understanding of medieval English: the *Ormulum* was composed by a monk, whose name, Orm or Ormin, is of clear Scandinavian origin (Raschellà 2005), whereas the language of *Beowulf* is commonly thought of representing an archaic stage of OE (Christophersen 1939, 86 in Epstein 2011). They are therefore significant texts, which help making headway in our understanding of the diachronic evolution of the English language, albeit from different viewpoints. In fact,

the text of the *Ormulum* sheds light on the EME variety of the North-East Midlands, which according to some scholars was leading the way for a key syntactic change in the history of English, that between an OV to a VO basis word order (see Kroch, Taylor and Ringe 2000; Trips 2002). The text of *Beowulf*, with its archaic traits, provides valuable insights into features of the OE language that are observed in the prose to a lesser extent (Tangelder and Los 2017, and see Zironi 2018 for the observation that the language of *Beowulf* might have sounded archaic even to its contemporaries).

Investigations on historical texts consist of what Labov (1994) labelled “bad data”,¹ and historical linguists have developed several methodologies in order to make “the best use” of them (van Kemenade and Los 2014). In order to situate the present contribution, I will briefly touch on general difficulties encountered in the study of historical texts, and give a brief overview on latest investigations on Earlier Germanic languages. I will argue that an interdisciplinary study of poetic texts, which crosses the borders between syntax, metric structure and pragmatics can help make headway into our comprehension of both older languages and texts. As is well known, in fact, only the written variety of a given historical stage of a language is available for investigation. Furthermore, the textual traditions of medieval languages are usually composed of texts of sometimes uncertain dating, or texts that constitute translations from Latin or, in the case of EME, from French. There might be also points in time for which written attestations of a language are scant. For instance, the Middle English (henceforth ME) period that spans from 1250 to 1350 is represented by a handful of extant prose texts, most of which are translated from French, or are conveyed by manuscripts copied much later than the probable date of composition of the text (Pintzuk and Taylor 2006).

Furthermore, poetic texts are excluded from syntactic investigations, since their composition is generally thought of representing marked linguistic structures. Most recent investigations on OE, for instance, are conducted on prose texts (with some exceptions, such as Ronneberger-Sibold 2020). Some examples are constituted by Taylor and Pintzuk (2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2015), Struik and van Kemenade (2018), Struik (2022). Latest investigations have moreover shown that the genre of a text plays an important role in defining language change (Whitt 2018). For instance, the investigation by Farasyn *et al.* (2018) shows that the inclusion or exclusion of genre as a variable yields different results for the study of different language change phenomena in Low German. Fuß and Hinterhölzl (2023) moreover show that the rise of German expletive *es* is first witnessed in legal texts. The fundamental distinction between prose and poetry is therefore more articulated and complicates the maze further, since the sole choice of prose texts versus poetic ones does not guarantee that genre, for instance, might not be influential in the pace and diffusion of a language change phenomenon. Therefore, once an adequate methodology is developed, poetic texts can provide valuable insights into historical languages stages.

This paper is embedded within a recent line of investigation in historical linguistics that assesses the influence of information structure in language change. Old medieval languages have been claimed to be “discourse configurational”; a notable example is OE. In fact, van Kemenade and Los (2006; 2018), van Kemenade (2009), Links and van Kemenade (2020) show that an articulated paradigm of demonstrative pronouns and deictic adverbs are employed in the structuring of the utterance, dividing the clause into a domain where given or familiar

¹ Historical language data only provide a partial representation of a historical stage of a given language. In fact, historical linguists and philologists only work with written texts, therefore little to no information can be gathered regarding the spoken variety of a historical language. Moreover, written production for a certain stage of a language might not be balanced e.g., with respect to diatopic or diaphasic variation.

information is conveyed and a domain in which new information is presented. Various studies, which develop Behaghel's (1932) laws in formal frameworks, have shown that Early West Germanic languages tend to present given information before new or contrasted information, and that the position of the finite verb in the clause was relevant for the structuring of the narrative. For example, Hinterhölzl and Petrova (2010) show that V1 sentences, i.e. sentences in which the first constituent is the finite verb, usually open a new narrative passage. Pragmatic strategies are also attested in one of the oldest extant extensive texts for the Germanic tradition: Wulfila's *Bible*. Buzzoni (2009) shows that different particles in Gothic are used to express pragmatic relations on the textual level. Understanding these phenomena is therefore not only relevant in the study of language change, but also for the interpretation of texts.

Information structural categories correlate moreover with distinct prosodic features, which can be measured and assessed in spoken languages, but which must be inferred indirectly for the historical stages of a language. With the notable exception of Notker of St. Gall and Otfrid, however, diacritics in manuscripts are not a reliable source of information regarding the prosodic prominence, or lack thereof, of a certain word (Fleischer 2009). I will apply a formal theoretical framework to the study of object pronouns in *Beowulf* and combine it with the scrutiny of the metrical structure of the text. It will be shown that metrical structure proves a valuable source of information to determine the prosodic contour of pragmatic categories, such as topic or contrast, in historical texts. The investigation proposed here yields therefore indirect confirmation to similar investigations performed on prosodic texts, for which no direct assessment of metrical prominence can be derived, and widen our understanding of narrative strategies in older texts. Furthermore, the present contribution also assesses the interaction between metrical structure and word order in the *Ormulum*; this text is relevant for the study of the syntactic language change from an OV to a VO word order in the history of English. In fact, it was composed in the North-East Midlands variety, which played a key role in the development of VO word order (Trips 2002). I will show that the sentences extracted from this text, following the methodology developed within the study of word order language change in the history of English (see Taylor and Pintzuk 2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2015; Struik and van Kemenade 2018; Struik 2022), are not dissimilar from other coeval prose texts. However, the data provided by the *Ormulum* should not be taken at face value, since I will show that the syntax of this text is heavily constrained by its meter.² Similarly for what will be shown for *Beowulf*, this text moreover provides valuable information regarding the interaction of prosody and information structure, since prominent metrical positions are exploited by the author in order to highlight e.g. a shift in reference.

The contribution is structured as follows: in Section 1, two case studies are presented. The first case study crosses the borders between syntax and metrics and explores the influence of meter on the word order of the text of the *Ormulum*. The second case study concentrates on pronouns in the text of *Beowulf*. In the conclusive section, the two studies are compared.

² A reviewer remarks that this is a trivial conclusion; this conclusion is however reached with a systematic methodology, by extracting sentences relevant for the study of language change in English, thereby following the current methodology employed in syntactic research on OV/VO variation in English, and by combining the scrutiny of the syntax of the text with its metrical structure. Deciding to include or exclude this text in syntactic investigations about EME is not a trivial task, since it represents one of the few EME specimens of the North-East Midlands variety. I argue that the data presented here can help scholars define a methodology for the study of the syntax of the *Ormulum*.

1. *Crossing the Borders between Metrical Structure, Linguistics and Pragmatics*

In this section, I present two case studies that focus on the intricate relationship between metrical structure, word order and information structure. The first case study regards the text of the *Ormulum*, a collection of metric homilies, composed between 1160 and 1180 by a monk named Orm or Ormin. This text is also known for its peculiar orthography,³ as it is conveyed in the main manuscript transmitting it: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius I, and for its metrical structure. The text is composed of long lines of 15 syllables in total, which are divided in an octasyllabic and a heptasyllabic verse respectively, separated by a caesura. These are characterised by an alternation of weak and strong syllables, distributed in the following way: ws|ws|ws|ws||ws|ws|ws|w (Buzzoni 2017). Considered of lesser literary merit (see Wilson 1939), this text is relevant for our understanding of EME during a stage in which the English language was undergoing a fundamental language change phenomenon.

Better known and considered of great literary value is the text of the second case study: *Beowulf*, by an anonymous author. It is conveyed in a unique copy in the Cotton Vitellius AXV, dating back to the 10th century. The composition date of this text is still matter of debate, the prevalent hypothesis dates its composition around the 7th and 8th centuries (Tangelder and Los 2017, but see also Neidorf 2014). Abstracting away from the controversies regarding its date of composition, the text is characterized by its archaic lexical inventory and presents different syntactic structures with respect to OE prose texts. In fact, Tangelder and Los (2017) observe that clausal arguments are less common in the OE poetic literary corpus and moreover conclude that the syntax of *Beowulf* probably represents a stage in the language where the V2 rule had not fully developed yet. Regarding the syntax of negation, van Kemenade (1997) shows that in *Beowulf* sentences headed by a negative particle not immediately followed by the finite verb can be found;⁴ since this word order is not attested in OE prose, van Kemenade (1997) argues that *Beowulf* presents an archaic pattern. The text consists of 3182 Germanic alliterating lines. It is relevant to note for the purposes of the present study that not all lexical categories usually carry alliteration; pronouns, for instance, rarely do so (Sievers 1893 in Russom 1987, 65). In fact, pronouns are placed usually on so-called verse dips, i.e. those portions of the verse that are not metrically prominent. The availability of complete verse scansion for this text allows us to compare the metrical prominence of a word and directly compare it to its information structural value. In this way, it is possible to gather insights into the mapping between prosodic/metric prominence and information structural value of an utterance, thereby giving support to recent linguistic theories regarding the distribution of information structurally marked material in an utterance and its prosodic value.

1.1 *Interaction of Metrical Structure and Syntax in the Ormulum*

I will start with the text of the *Ormulum*; the investigation presented in this section is embedded within a wider investigation concerning a decade-long debated issue, that of the language

³ The orthography used in the *Ormulum* is characterised by the extensive use of double consonants, in place of simple consonants used in other coeval texts (Raschellà 2005).

⁴ The word order patterns described by van Kemenade (1997) relate to Jespersen's cycle in the history of English. In a nutshell, in OE prose texts the finite verb immediately follows the negative particle *ne*; *Beowulf* provides evidence for a stage not attested in OE prose, where the negative particle had not fully weakened and was used in isolation at the beginning of a clause, thus representing a more archaic stage of the Jespersen's cycle. The interested reader can consult van Kemenade (1997) for further details.

change between an OV to a VO word order in the history of English.⁵ As is well known, OE syntax was affected by variation as far as the respective order of both verb and object and of verb and auxiliary/modal is concerned. Different word orders are observed in the OE corpus, but by the end of the ME period, the Auxiliary-Verb-Object (AuxVO) order has become the unmarked one. Scholars have proposed different causes for the language change, both internal to the language (e.g. the loss of rich case morphology, Roberts 1997) and external.⁶ According to some scholars, a major factor in the reanalysis of Auxiliary-Verb-Object order as the unmarked one was the contact with the Scandinavian settlers, who, after having tormented Early Medieval England with several incursions, were assigned a zone under their jurisdiction, the so-called *Danelaw*. This area spans from today's Northern England down to London, leaving out Kent, the South and the Mid-West of England. In 1066 the political scene changes and a new dynasty ascends the throne with the Norman William the Conqueror, bringing the influence of another language on ME, Old French. However, linguistic influence from the Scandinavian settlers has not certainly vanished overnight, and scholars such as Kroch, Taylor and Ringe (2001) and Trips (2002) analyse the variation between texts coming from different varieties of EME in light of the possible influence left by North-Germanic grammar over OE and EME.⁷ Others, such as Emonds and Faarlund (2014) go as far as to say that OE vanished altogether, and that Present Day English descended from what they label "Anglicised Norse"; moreover, they view the text of the *Ormulum* as the first specimen of such language.⁸

Whereas OE was mostly represented by the West-Saxon variety, the EME stage presents a wider range of evidence for dialectal variation, which allowed scholars trace language variation on different levels. The extant texts representing the initial stages of the ME period come from the South-East Midlands, the North-East Midlands, the West Midlands and Kent. It is therefore possible to compare texts composed in areas formerly subjected to the *Danelaw* and texts composed outside of it. The two texts composed in the North-East Midlands are the *Continuations of Peterborough*, and the text object of the first case study, the *Ormulum*.⁹ Given its provenance, this text is therefore central in understanding the assumed impact of North-Germanic grammar on the syntax of EME. In fact, Trips (2002) analyses the syntax of the text and concludes that different word order phenomena are ascribable to the language contact with North-Germanic grammar. Buzzoni (2017) shows however that the use of the invariant complementizer "*þat*" and the development of the future modal "shall" can be analysed as following directly from the previous OE grammar. Furthermore, Buzzoni (2017) notices that prototypical features of North Germanic, such as the post-posed definite article and the Norse middle voice verbal endings are lacking altogether from the text of the *Ormulum*. This piece of evidence is significant, giv-

⁵ This section summarises findings and reports data published in De Bastiani (2020, 133-57); the focus of the study in De Bastiani (2020) was that of presenting a comprehensive account of word order variation in the history of English. The evidence presented in this section is analysed in comparison to that in Section 1.2 with the aim of defining the importance of metrical evidence for the study of diachronic syntax and pragmatics.

⁶ It is not the aim of this contribution to review the different syntactic frameworks and the different analyses for the OE word order variation. The interested reader can consult Roberts (1997), Pintzuk (1999), Fischer *et al.* (2000), Biberauer and Roberts (2005), De Bastiani (2020), Struik (2022), and Struik and van Kemenade (2022).

⁷ As OE texts are mostly composed in West Saxon, and texts from different varieties are attested from EME onwards, scholars interpret the more innovative character of the syntax of North-East Midlands texts as a reflection of the impact of North-Germanic grammar during the Scandinavian dominance in the former *Danelaw*.

⁸ The claims expressed in Emonds and Faarlund (2014) have been criticised for instance by Bech and Walkden (2016) and it has been shown that many EME phenomena directly derive from OE.

⁹ Some scholars, however, assign a North-Western origin to the text, see Buzzoni 2017.

en the clear Scandinavian origin of the monk's name (Raschellà 2005). One might speculate that not only Orm's name is of Scandinavian origin, but also that his grammar might present North-Germanic traits. The question as to how the evidence presented by this text should be interpreted remains open; a central feature that needs to be addressed is its metrical structure. It will be shown that word order variation is not free, and that beside purely syntactic reasons, the metrical structure is a strong factor in determining the observed word order.

In order to embed this text within the debate of word order variation in the history of English, only main and subordinate clauses with a finite and a non-finite verb are analysed, thereby excluding potential ambiguous structures. In this way, linear OV(Aux) and AuxVO/AuxOV orders can be elicited. Of all the sentences presenting these features, a subsample was analysed, obtained by examining the first of every three hits retrieved from the Penn Parsed Corpus of Middle English, 2nd edition (Kroch, Taylor, and Santorini 2000).^{10,11} The main focus of the investigation revolves around OV and VO structures with both a nominal and a pronominal object. For each sentence, the metrical structure of the poem was derived, and furthermore its word order is manipulated, in order to check whether the choice of a different word order would clash with the metrical structure of the text. The hits extracted from the corpus have the abbreviation *CMORM*, whereas text passages extracted manually follow Holt's (1878) edition.

Raschellà (2005) remarks that the metrical pattern of the work usually follows the natural accentuation of words, albeit with some exceptions. Furthermore, he remarks that the peculiar orthography and the sometimes pedantic repetitions are employed so as to meet the metrical requirements. An indication of how the author conceived his work is given by the author himself in the *Dedication* of the work:

- (1) Icc hafe sett her o þiss boc
 Amang Goddspelless wordess,
 All þurh me sellfenn, maniz word
 Þe ríme swa to fillenn;
 "I have set here in this book, among the words of the Gospel, all through myself, many words, in order to fill the rhyme".
 (*Ormulum*, Holt 1878, *Dedication*, vv. 41-44 in De Bastiani 2020, 156)

As the author himself writes, he has set "many words" in order to "fill the rhyme"; the concept of "rhyme" should not be intended in its literal sense, since in the work rhyme or even alliteration are not used regularly, but are encountered sporadically (Raschellà 2005). I propose to interpret the word "rhyme" as the more general concept of metrical structure. The metrical structure has indeed an influence over word order, as in example (2):¹²

- (2) and nu þe shall Elysabæþ || Þin wif an sune childenn;
 and now to.you shall Elizabeth your wife a son generate
 "And your wife Elizabeth shall generate a child to you".
 (CMORM-M 1, I.2.141 in De Bastiani 2020, 138)

¹⁰ For further details on the overall distribution of sentences according to their surface word order and the criteria employed, see De Bastiani (2020).

¹¹ The examples retrieved from both this corpus and the York Corpus of Old English Poetry (Pinztuk and Plug 2001) were processed with Corpus Search query language (Randall 2004) and the Corpus Studio suite (Komen 2011).

¹² The symbol "||" signals the caesura. Syllable division and translation of the examples are done by the author of the present contribution.

The main clause in (2) has the following surface word order: Auxiliary > Subject > Direct Object > Non-finite verb (AuxOV). As is known from research both on OE and EME, the order Auxiliary > Non-finite verb > Object (AuxVO) is likewise possible. Furthermore, the order AuxVO, with a full nominal object, is growing in frequency already at the start of the ME period (see for instance Pintzuk and Taylor 2006). Therefore, the question arises as to whether the word order found in this sentence, which is permitted by the grammar of EME, is due to syntactic reasons, or is rather constrained by the metrical structure. The relevant sequence of object and non-finite verb is found in the heptasyllabic verse, whose metrical structure is reported in example (3):

- (3) *Ʒin wif an su-ne chil-denn*
 w s w s w s w

The heptasyllabic verse ends with a falling intonation; if we manipulate the respective word order of verb and object, we would obtain the following structure (the “*” indicates that the example is not attested as such in the text):

- (4) **Ʒin wif chil-denn an su-ne*
 w s w s w s w

Whereas the accentuation of the direct object *an sune* would not be altered by placing it after the non-finite verb, the natural accentuation pattern of the verb would be altered if the order of the sentence were (Auxiliary) Verb Object. In fact, the final syllable of the verb would fall on a strong metrical position, whereas the root of the verb would be on a weak metrical position, thereby clashing with the natural accentuation pattern of the verb. Manipulations of the entire long verse would likely result in diverging prosodic patterns; the sentence starts with a coordinating conjunction, followed by a temporal adverbial and an indirect object pronoun. The sentence presents then the modal finite verb and an inverted nominal subject. This word order is encountered in prose texts as well. It has been noticed, in fact, that the OE and EME area preceding the finite verb (known as left periphery in generative accounts inspired by Rizzi’s 1997 seminal work) can be filled with temporal adverbials and pronouns, whereas nominal subjects have a strong tendency to follow the finite verb (van Kemenade 2009; van Kemenade and Westergaard 2012). Example (5a) illustrates inversion of finite verb and full nominal subject, whereas example (5b) illustrates a subject pronoun preceding the finite verb. In example (5b), moreover, the prepositional phrase preceding the subject pronoun clearly establishes a link to something that has been mentioned in the preceding discourse.

- (5) a. On twam Ʒingum hæfde God Ʒæs mannes sawle gegodod
 in two things had God the man’s soul endowed
 “With two things God had endowed man’s soul.”
 (ÆCHom I, 1.20.1 in van Kemenade and Westergaard 2012, 92)
- b. Be ðæt we magon suiðe swutule oncnawan ðæt ...
 by that we may very clearly perceive that ...
 “By that, we may perceive very clearly that ...”
 (CP, 26.181.16 in *ibidem*)

Whereas the word order of example (2) is indeed also found in prose texts, it is worth trying to manipulate it and determine whether the composer might have chosen other word orders; example (6) shows the scansion for the whole line, and example (7) provides a manipulated version of it:

(6) and nu þe *shall E-ly-sa-bæp* || *Þin wif* an su-ne chil-denn
 w s w s w s w s w s w s w s w

(7) * and *E-ly-sa-bæp* Þin wif shall nu þe an su-ne chil-denn
 w s w s w s w s w s w s w s w

If we move the whole nominal subject, *Elysabæp Þin wif*, after the coordinating conjunction, the natural accentuation of the name *Elisabeth* would be altered; moreover, the possessive pronoun and the indirect object pronoun would both fall on a strong beat. Usually, pronouns are not prosodically prominent, unless a clear contrast is expressed, see example (8):

(8) I told you that Mary is reading MY book, not PETER's.

In this case, the possessive pronoun “my” is contrasted and is therefore prosodically prominent.

The context preceding the sentence in (2), however, would not be compatible with a contrastive interpretation of both the possessive and indirect object pronouns. The word order in this sentence, therefore, is driven not only by syntactic requirements, since both the presence of light elements preceding the finite verb and the pre-posing of the direct object are found in coeval prose texts, but also by metrical requirements. The alteration of the word order, yielding structures likewise found in the prose, would clash with the natural prosodic pattern of single words, or would give rise to contrastive prominence, not justified by the preceding context.

If we examine sentences with the word order Auxiliary Verb Object, we would obtain similar deviant structures, as is the case for example (9) below.

(9) Þuss þu miht lakenn Drihhtin Godd || Wiþþ oxen i gode þæwess
 Thus you might worship Lord God with oxen in good habits
 “Thus you can worship God our Lord, with oxen in good habits.”
 (CMORM-M1, I.41.428 in De Bastiani 2020, 140)

The relevant structure is found in the octasyllabic verse, repeated in (10) with its metrical structure:

(10) Þuss þu miht *la-kenn Drih-htin Godd*
 w s w s w s w s

If we invert the direct object and the non-finite verb, the natural accentuation of the non-finite verb would be altered, as in (11):

(11) *Þuss þu miht *Drih-htin Godd la-kenn*
 w s w s w s w s

Since both AuxOV and AuxVO order is possible in EME, the choice of one order with respect to the other is in this and similar examples constrained by the metrical structure. Similar observations can be drawn for subordinate clauses (see De Bastiani 2020).

In other cases, manipulating the verse does not result in violations of the prosodic accentuations of the words composing the text itself:

- (12) and tær uppo þatt oferrwerrc || Þeġġ haffdenn liccness
 and there upon that superstructure They had image
 metedd || Off Cherubyn.
 sculpted of Cherub
 “And there, upon that superstructure, they had sculpted an image of a cherub”.
 (CMORM-M1, I.34.374 in De Bastiani 2020, 139)

The relevant structure is given by the sentence “Þeġġ haffdenn liccness metedd” with the order AuxOV, positioned in a heptasyllabic verse. If we invert the order of verb and direct object in this case, the resulting sentence would not clash with the natural accentuation of the words composing the sentence, see (13a-b):

- (13) a. Þeġġ haff-denn *licc-ness me-tedd*
 w s w s w s w
 b. * Þeġġ haff-denn *me-tedd licc-ness*
 w s w s w s w

As can be seen, since both the object and the verb are composed of two syllables with an iambic rhythm, exchanging their respective positions in the verse would not obtain orders that deviate from the natural accentuation of the words. If we look at the wider context, however, one might argue that in this case the order Object Verb is kept in order to maintain final rhyme with the verses following:

- (14) Affterr þatt itt ma33 wel inoh
 Ben se33d o Latin spæche.
 and tær uppo þatt oferrwerrc
 Þe33 haffdenn liccness metedd
 Off Cherubyn, and haffdenn itt
 O tve33enn stokess metedd.
 “After that it may well enough be said in Latin, and there upon that superstructure they had sculpted an image of a Cherub, and they had made it on two places.”
 (*Ormulum*, Holt 1878, 34, vv. 1044-1049 in De Bastiani 2020, 139)

The last verse on the excerpt reported presents the same verb in the same final position as in the sentence under discussion. As Raschellà (2005) notices, the author of the *Ormulum* does not use rhyme or alliteration regularly, but does use them sporadically. Keeping the rhyme with the same verb in the subsequent lines might be one reason that motivated Orm/Ormin to structure the sentence in (12) as AuxOV, in order to place the verb in the same position in the two verses.

Another syntactic structure relevant for the language change scenario affecting the English language is Subject (Object) Verb Auxiliary. From the subsample selected for the text of the

Ormulum, I retrieved 5 main clauses with this word order and 4 subordinate clauses. All the five main clauses in the sample would result in unnatural accentuation patterns on the verb, if the word order were switched, as can be seen from example (15):

- (15) and ec þe werelld tacnenn maġġ || Mannkinn all þess te better
 and also the world represent may mankind all this the better
 “And also the world may represent mankind all the better.”
 (CMORM-M1, II.259.2579 in De Bastiani 2020, 151)

If we invert the relative order of finite and non-finite verb, we would obtain a deviant accentuation pattern on the non-finite verb. Example (16) illustrates the verse scansion, and example (17) constitutes a manipulation of the verse:

- (16) and ec þe we-relld *tac-nenn maġġ*
 w s w s w s w s
- (17) * and ec þe we-relld *maġġ tac-nenn*
 w s w s w s w s

It must be noticed, however, that the subordinate clause in the sample do not show such clear indications regarding the influence of metrical structure on word order.

A last aspect relevant within the language change scenario investigated through this text regards object pronouns. It is not the aim of this paper to review different syntactic frameworks proposed to account for both the word order variation and change, but it suffices to say that post-verbal object pronouns are regarded as clear signposts of an AuxVO base word order (Pintzuk 1999).¹³ The following excerpt from the *Dedication* of the work shows, once again, that word order in the *Ormulum* is strongly dependent on metric and possibly stylistic reasons:

- (18) Forr þatt I wollde bliþelig ||
 for that I want blithely
 Þatt all Ennglisshe lede ||
 that all English people
 Wipþ ære sholde listenn **itt**, ||
 with ear should listen it
 Wipþ herrte sholde **itt** trowwenn, ||
 with heart should it suffer
- Wipþ tunge sholde spellenn **itt** ||
 with tongue should spell it

¹³ In De Bastiani (2020, 2022) I actually argued for a uniform AuxVO base word order for both OE and EME, with different leftward movements to account for the word order variation observed. In this and similar frameworks (see also Struik 2022), it is information structure and weight of the constituents that are relevant for the positioning of objects in pre- and post-verbal position. Nevertheless, also within this framework, the growing frequency of post-verbal pronouns is interpreted as a signal that AuxVO order has become the unmarked one and that the conditions driving other word orders have been subjected to blurring. For further details, the interested reader can consult De Bastiani (2020, 2022), Struik (2022), Struik and van Kemenade (2022).

Wip̃p dede sholde_itt folghenn, ||
 with deed should it follow

“Because I want that all English people blithely listen to it [the Gospel] with their ears, and with their hearts they should suffer it, and with their tongues they should announce it, and with their deeds they should follow it.”

(CMORM-M1, DED.L113.33 in De Bastiani 2020, 149)

The *Dedication* of the work presents a series of sentences, all containing a prepositional phrase, a modal verb (“sholde”), an object pronoun and a non-finite verb. The different structures are alternatively distributed on an octasyllabic and a heptasyllabic verse; when the object pronoun is found in the heptasyllabic verse, it precedes the non-finite verb and contraction with the preceding modal verb takes place (as indicated with the underscore). In the octasyllabic verse, the object pronoun follows the non-finite verb; the whole structure of this excerpt is characterised by a concatenation of sentences in which the same syntactic elements are placed alternatively. It is clear that the choice of placing a pre- or post-verbal object pronoun is not strictly derived from the syntax (which allowed both word order structures in coeval texts), but rather from metric and stylistic reasons. If we switched object pronoun and non-finite verbs in these verses, the whole syllabic count of each verse would change: switching the pronoun in an octasyllabic verse would allow contraction with the modal verb, thereby yielding a heptasyllabic verse, and the opposite operation would result in an octasyllabic verse from an originally heptasyllabic one. Apart from cases similar to the one illustrated here, where switching the order of object pronoun and non-finite verb would result in a different syllabic count for the verse, there are some examples in the *Ormulum* where object pronouns are placed on strong beats to signal contrast or a change in referent. For instance, in example (19), the attention shifts to the addressee of the text (us), after that a different topic has been described in the previous context:

- (19) All þiss wass uss bitacnedd wel || Þurrh þatt
 All this was to.us symbolised well through that
 Judissken chesstre,
 Jewish city
 “All this is exemplified to us through that Jewish city”.
 (CMORM-M1, I.94.827 in De Bastiani 2020, 147)

- (20) All þiss wass *uss* bi-tac-nedd wel
 w s w s w s w s

As can be seen from the verse scansion in (20), the pronoun falls on a strong syllable. Similarly, in example (21), the two pronouns “icc” and “te” are placed on strong syllables:

- (21) and icc itt hafe forþedd te, || Acc all
 and I it have carried.out to.you but all
 þurrh Cristess hellpe;
 through Christ’s help
 “And I fulfilled it for you, but only through the help of Christ”.
 (CMORM-M1, DED.L23.8 in De Bastiani 2020, 145)

The structure of the verse is given in (22):

- (22) and *icc* itt ha-fe for-þedd *te*
 w s w s w s w s

As can be seen, in this sentence we find three pronouns; the object neuter pronoun “it” refers to the wish of the author’s brother Walter that the work is dedicated to him, around which the sentence and the context surrounding it revolves. The two pronouns “icc” and “te” refer to the author and the addressee of the dedication respectively; I argue that they are intentionally placed on a strong syllable each in order to highlight the two participants in the discourse.

Summarising, the examples discussed in this section show that the metrical structure of the poetic text is a relevant factor in determining certain word order choices by the author. In fact, the author employs word order sequences that were available in the grammar of EME, but I argue that his word order choices are guided by the wish to adhere to a strict metrical succession of weak and strong syllables. The evidence discussed in this section however shows that different word orders were indeed available options in Orm’s grammar, but their occurrence should be evaluated against the metrical composition of the text, and therefore cannot be directly compared to other coeval prose texts. Furthermore, the author exploits the different word order options available to create certain stylistic effect, such as the alternating OV and VO structures with object pronouns, or to emphasise the discourse participants. This last piece of evidence is relevant for our understanding of the pragmatic organization of the clause and can help scholars derive important indications concerning the discourse prominence of a referent and its prosodic prominence. This topic is the object of the second case study.

1.2 *On the Interaction between Metrical Structure and Information Structure in Beowulf*

In this section, I present novel data about the interaction of metrical structure, information structure and syntax basing myself on evidence from *Beowulf*. The syntax of this text has been the subject of studies by Pintzuk and Kroch (1989), and more recently by Tangelder and Los (2017). Tangelder and Los (2017) not only examine the syntax of the text with respect to the positioning of lexical and (incipient) auxiliary verbs, but also examine the position of auxiliaries in the clause with respect to their position in the verse and their relation to alliteration, gaining relevant information regarding the interaction between verse, sentence structure and prosodic mapping. They show, in fact, that movement of the verb to the second position in the clause (the so-called V2 phenomenon) is limited to cases in which the verb itself is monosyllabic. In fact, the first positions of both a- and b- verses can accommodate light unstressed elements. They conclude that the data in *Beowulf* show that verb movement is constrained by verse structure on the one hand, since full non-monosyllabic verbs are rather positioned at the end of the verse, and limited to formulaic constructions on the other hand. They however argue that the structures observed in *Beowulf* may represent an archaic stage of the language, during which the V2 phenomenon had not developed in the same way that is observable in prose texts.

I will show that the qualitative examination of personal pronouns positioned in dips and lifts in the verse can shed light on the interaction between information structure, syntax and prosody in OE, thereby giving indirect support to recent formal investigations on the role of information structure and prosody on Earlier Germanic sentences. A growing body of researchers have investigated the interaction between pragmatic categories, i.e. topic, focus, contrast, and their position in the Early Germanic clause. The different investigations elaborate in formal frameworks the intuition by Behaghel (1932) that already known material precedes new material

in the clause. Furthermore, information structural categories usually correlate with a specific prosodic intonation, which can be measured in present-day languages by means of prosodic softwares, but which must be assumed in written older texts. It is therefore necessary to elaborate alternative strategies in order to capture the prosodic contour of a phrase in a historical text; advancements in our understanding of the relation between information structure, syntax and prosodic prominence can moreover offer new insights on the interpretation of medieval texts.

For the present case study, pronouns are investigated in two different configurations. For the first one, I specifically selected object pronouns placed before the finite semi-auxiliary verb in the *Beowulf* main and subordinate clauses from the York Corpus of Old English Poetry (Pintzuk and Plug 2001), analysed the information structural value of the pronoun and checked its metrical position in the verse. For the second configuration, I then manually scanned the first 1000 verses of *Beowulf* from the *Electronic Beowulf 4.0* edition (Kiernan and Jacob 2015) and elicited those pronouns that are positioned on a lift in a verse, to determine whether their positioning on a prominent verse position might correlate with an emphatic or contrastive reading. The reason why I specifically looked for object pronouns placed before the finite semi-auxiliary verb in structures where the auxiliary verb is not clause-final is due to information structural value attributed to pronouns in this position in the literature. In the literature on OE, in fact, it has been noticed that the clause was generally divided into a domain in which given information, or referents under the scope of discussion, is found, and an area in which new information is predicated about such referents (van Kemenade and Los 2006; van Kemenade 2009). This area is either demarcated by discourse particles, or by the finite verb. Personal pronouns usually refer to already presented referents, and are often found in the left periphery of the OE clause. Object pronouns preceding the finite verb are in fact moved from their original position in the clause, often because they constitute given information and furthermore mark the topic of a given passage. I moreover restricted the search by selecting object pronouns found before semi-auxiliaries, since these might more reasonably be analysed as being in a position higher than the VP and therefore demarcate the left periphery.¹⁴ In this way, structures comparable to the ones analysed for the OE prose are obtained. The information structural value of object pronouns in OE and EME prose texts is studied by De Bastiani and Hinterhölzl (2020), who observe that the object pronouns found before the inflected verb are co-referential with a specific kind of referent, namely the topic of the preceding context. The definitions of topic in the literature are various and slightly different from one another; for the present contribution, the topic is identified as that referent the proposition revolves around (Reinhart 1981; Lambrecht 1994).

¹⁴ I searched the corpus with Corpus Studio (Komen 2011); the programme uses its own definition files for the parsing. It must be noticed that the label “finite aux”, used for the present search, yields hits with the verbs “have”, “be” and “weorpan”, as well as verbs such as “onginnan”, the latter are followed by an infinitival verb. These had not fully grammaticalised into auxiliaries, therefore the label “semi-auxiliaries”, and, as regards the verbs “be” and “weorpan”, also copular constructions are included in the hits obtained. Even with this restrictive search, it cannot be excluded that when the semi-auxiliaries are used as copulas, the verb is in a lower position, even though there are cases as (26) below in which the subject NP follows the verb. The dataset, however, shows also in these cases a clear distinction between a topic and a focus domain, which maps onto the metrical structure of the work. I restricted the search in this way in order to obtain structures comparable to the ones analysed in the prose especially by De Bastiani and Hinterhölzl (2020), who examine the information structural value of pronouns with respect to the auxiliary verb; it must be kept in mind, however, that according to Tangelder and Los (2017) the syntax of *Beowulf* might represent a stage in which V2 had not fully developed yet. Further investigations are therefore needed, in order to determine, e.g. whether the distinction between a topic and a focus domain predates the grammaticalisation of the V2 constraint and movement of topical elements to the left periphery.

- (23) Her *Egþriht cing* forðferde, 7 *hýne* hæfde ær Offa Mircna
 here egbert king died and him had previously offa mercians
 cing 7 Brihtric Wessexena cing aflýmed .iii. gear
 king and bertric west-saxons king banished three years
 of Angelcynnnes lande on Francland ær he cing wære.
 from angles land on france before he king was
 “In this year king Egbert died, and Offa king of the Mercians and Bertric king of the
 West Saxons had banished him for three years from England to France, before he
 became king”.
 (cochronC, ChronC_ [Rositzke], 836.1.517 in De Bastiani and Hinterhölzl 2020, 9)

As can be seen from example (23), the excerpt revolves around King Egbert; further information is given about this referent and the object pronoun “hýne” is therefore co-referential with it. Moreover, in the second sentence of the excerpt, after that the topic has been introduced, the object pronoun co-referential with it is moved before the finite verb, whereas the new subjects introduced are found after the finite verb. The sentences following the introduction of King Egbert provide new information about it. The second sentence of the excerpt is therefore clearly shaped as a topic-focus structure: the object pronoun co-referential with the topic of the passage is moved before the finite verb, and the new information about it is found after it. The area which adds new information about the topic is identified in the literature with the focus domain of the clause (Lambrecht 1994). In the absence of further prosodic clues, it is not possible to determine whether there is also a special prosodic contour associated both with the topic and with the element carrying the main stress in the focus domain of the clause. This kind of information can be derived from the scrutiny of similar examples derived from poetic texts. Pronouns can however carry stress when they are contrasted or emphasised; I therefore expect pronouns positioned on lifts in the *Beowulf* verse to carry an emphatic or contrastive reading.

I start the investigation by examining structures in which object pronouns are placed before a finite semi-auxiliary verb. The hits extracted from the York Corpus of Old English Poetry are compared against the electronic edition by Kiernan and Iacob (2015), *Electronic Beowulf 4.0*. The corpus, in fact, does not provide information about line numbers, whereas the electronic edition provides both a critical edition and a diplomatic transcription, together with a verse scansion and an interlinear translation. The electronic edition provides complete verse scansions elaborated according to the main metrical theories in the literature on OE meter. I decided to consult the scansions elaborated according to the method of Sievers (1893), which consists in a descriptive subdivision of five main verse types, and the scansion by Russom (1987), which is guided by phonological and theoretical principles. A discussion about the theoretical underpinnings in OE and Early Germanic metre is beyond the scope of this paper, but the interested reader can consult Goering (2016) for a summary on the different scansion methodologies in use. The readings in the electronic edition were compared with Klaeber’s (1922) critical edition and Gummere’s (1910) translation.

An example of an object pronoun preceding the semi-auxiliary verb is given in (24); the examples containing the indication *cobeowul* are extracted from the corpus.¹⁵ They are however presented according to the verse division provided in the Electronic Critical Edition. The verse

¹⁵ The dollar sign “\$” is used in the corpus to signal both emendations by the corpus compilers and emendations inserted by the corpus editors (<<https://www.ling.upenn.edu/hist-corpora/annotation/index.html>> 10/2023).

scansion for the relevant portion of the verse is given above it. For descriptive purposes, the label “x” indicates a weak metrical position, and the label “s” indicates a strong one:¹⁶

- (24)
- | | | | | | | |
|------|-------------------|----------|-----------|--------|-------|---|
| 974b | | x | x | s | s | x |
| | | ac | hyne | sar | hafað | |
| | | but | him | sorrow | has | |
| | \$mid \$nydgripe | nearwe | befongen, | | | |
| | with hostile-grip | forcibly | seized | | | |
| | balwon bendum. | | | | | |
| | baleful bonds | | | | | |
- “But sorrow has tightly grasped him in a hostile grip, in baleful bonds.”
(cobeowul, 31.972.815)

The first part of the sentence (“ac hyne sar hafað”) is found in the b-verse of line 974, as in the edition of *Electronic Beowulf*. The referent of the passage, to which the object pronoun “hyne” refers to is Grendel, the first of the three monsters Beowulf defeats in the epic poem. The whole passage is a concatenation of sentences giving information about this referent, which we can therefore identify as the topic of the passage. In the sentence under scrutiny, it is said the sorrow had tightly grasped him. The subject of the sentence, “sar” is alliterating, and is placed on a lift of the verse, in both Siever’s and Russom’s scansions. The a-verse of line 974 introduces alliteration on the sound <s>, see (25):

- (25)
- | | | | | | |
|----------|------------|-----|------|--------|-------|
| synnum | geswenced, | ac | hyne | sar | hafað |
| misdeeds | vexed | but | him | sorrow | has |
- “Vexed with crimes, but sorrow has him [...]”.
(*Beowulf*, 974)

This verse provides a coherent mapping between metrical and prosodic structure with information structural categories: the topic is placed on a verse dip, whereas the new information is given prominence by being placed on an alliterating lift in the verse. The subject precedes the finite verb in this sentence, unlike what is observed in the prose, but this is clearly due to reasons of alliteration.

Generally, when object pronouns are placed before the inflected verb, they are co-referent with the topic of the passage in both main and subordinate clauses, and fall on a verse dip, as illustrated in examples (26-27). Parts not pertaining to the hits extracted from the corpus, but belonging to the same line are given in round brackets, and alliteration is highlighted in bold. The relevant portion of the sentence is in italics. The line number follows the electronic edition.

- (26)
- | | | | | | | |
|------|------------------|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| 1876 | (blondenfeaxum.) | x | x | s | x | s |
| | grey-haired | <i>Him was bega wen,</i> | | | | |
| | ealdum infrodum, | him was both prospect | | | | |
| | old wise | o pres swidor [...] | | | | |
| | | other rather | | | | |
- “[...] The grey-haired one. For him, there was for both [events] the prospect,

¹⁶ The metrical notation presented here and in the following examples is elaborated in a way for the reader to follow the discussion, reproducing both Siever’s and Russom’s scansion of the verse descriptively.

for the old and wise one, the other rather [wished that they might never meet.]”
(cobeowul, 58.1873.1544)

- (27) 471 Sorh is me to secganne on sefan minum,
sorrow is me to say on heart mine
x x s x s x
gumena ængum, hwæt me Grendel hafað
to.men any what to.me Grendel has
hynðo on Heorote mid his hetepancum,
of.harms in Heorot with his of.hate.thoughts
færniða gefremed.
mischiefs done

“It is a sorrow for me to say which harms and mischiefs Grendel has provoked
to me in Heorot, with his thoughts of hate.”
(cobeowul, 16.473.397)

As can be observed from examples (26-27), the object pronouns are not part of the alliterative scheme; they refer to the active referent of the whole passage, whereas the verse lifts contain the new information predicated about these referents. The data examined so far thus show that not only is the observation in the literature that the OE clause is divided into a topic and a focus domain confirmed, but also confirms the hypothesised prosodic contour attributed to given and focal referents in the prose.

There are some examples, however, in which the object pronoun preceding the semi-auxiliary verb is not placed on a verse dip, see (28a-b):

- (28) a. 2003 þæt is undyrne, dryhten \$Higelac,
that is well-known lord Higelac
\$micel gemeting, monegum fira,
great meeting many men
s x s x
\$hwylc \$orleghwil¹⁷ uncer Grendles
which battle-time us.two Grendel
weard on \$ðam wange
happened on the land

“It is well known, lord Higelac, to many men, the great meeting; what a battle
for the both of us [Grendel and me] happened on the land.”
(cobeowul, 62.1999.1638)

- b.
952 (sæmran æt sæcce.) x x s s x
to.weaker at war Pu þe self hafast
you yourself have

¹⁷ Critical editions present different readings as regards the first component of this compound. Kiernan’s electronic edition has the reading “arfoðhwil” (time of suffering), whereas the edition by Klaeber has the reading reported in the corpus, whose parse is based on Dobby’s (1953) edition. In both cases, the alliteration is vocalic, and therefore the observation that the pronoun “uncer” falls on an alliterating position remains valid.

dædum gefremed, þæt þin \$dom lyfað
 with.deeds accomplished that your glory lives
 awa to aldre.
 forever to time

“[...] You yourself have accomplished with your deeds that your glory will always live forever in time.”
 (cobeowul, 30.953.797)

The dual pronoun “uncer” is analysed as falling on a lift in both Siever’s and Russom’s scansions; moreover, the pronoun alliterates. No clear contrast can be detected in this passage, and the pronoun refers to two referents that are active, since Beowulf is describing the battle between him and Grendel. However, the fact that this pronoun was chosen by the author in order for it to be placed on an alliterating lift can let us postulate that an emphatic nuance for this passage is given by the author. We can interpret this sentence in Beowulf’s speech as Beowulf’s will to underline that the battle was hard for the both of them, not for him or Grendel alone. Similarly, in example (28b) the reflexive pronoun “self”, on an alliterating position, is inserted, in order to stress that Beowulf had gained his fame alone through his deeds. The reflexive pronoun is therefore inserted in order to give emphasis to the utterance. Indications that the domain before the inflected verb in OE prose is more intricate and may also contain contrasted material is given by example (29), where the accusative object pronoun clearly marks a contrast:

- (29) and *us* he wæs geswutelod; na eallum folce, ac we
 and us he was manifested not all people but we
 ðe æton mid him.
 who ate with him
 “And it was to us that he was manifested, not to all the people, but to us,
 who ate with him.”
 (coaelhom, ÆHom_9, 158.1371 in De Bastiani and Hinterhölzl 2020, 13)

Investigating pronouns placed on verse lifts can help gather more insights on the relationship between information structural value and prosodic contour of pronouns. As stated in the beginning of this section, I manually scanned the first 1000 verses of the electronic edition and extracted those pronouns that are placed on a verse lift. These show a clearly marked contrastive interpretation or a shift in reference, the latter case is similar to what was observed for the *Ormulum*. The following examples are cited according to the Electronic Critical Edition.

- (30) 654 Næfre ic ænegum men ær alyfde,
 Never I to.any men before granted
 siþðan ic hond 7 rond hebban mihte,
 since I hand and shield lift could

 ðryþærn Dena, x s s x
 mightly-hall Danes buton þe nu ða
 except to.you now then
 “Never have I entrusted the mighty hall of the Danes to any men, since I have been able to lift hand and shield, except to you right now”.

In example (30), the pronoun “þe” is placed on a lift and alliterates, and is preceded by the adverbial “buton”, which already indicates a contrastive focus. The context preceding the occurrence of the pronoun also makes clear that the pronoun is contrasted with “any men”. Example (31) illustrates a case in which the speaker shifts his attention to the interlocutor:

- (31)
- | | | |
|-----|---|---|
| 945 | (bearngebyrdo.)
child-bearing
secg betsta,
warrior best
freogan on ferhþe.
love in heart | x x s x s
Nu ic Beowulf , þec,
now I Beowulf you
me for sunu wyll
me for son will |
|-----|---|---|
- “[...] Now Beowulf, I want to love you the best among warriors, as my son in my heart.”

The pronoun in the b-verse of line 945 does not alliterate, but is however placed on a prominent position in the verse. The speaker directly addresses his interlocutor, and focuses his attention to him. Example (32) illustrates both a shift in discourse referent and a contrast:

- (32)
- | | | |
|-----|---|--|
| 580 | (w[a]du weallendu.)
water willing-up
swylcra searoniða
such martial.strife
billa brogan.
swords terror | x x s x s
No ic wiht fram þe
not I anything from you
secan hyrde,
tell heard |
|-----|---|--|
- “[...] Never have I heard telling of such martial strife about you, of such terror of swords”.

Within the context surrounding example (32), Beowulf is recounting the killing of Grendel’s mother; his attention then shifts to his interlocutor, and Beowulf contrasts his experience with that of his addressee, stating that no such deeds has he heard saying about him, despite his boasting of brave deeds.

In other cases, we do not observe as marked a contrast as expressed in examples (30) and (32), but rather specimens of what the literature labels Contrastive Topics; contrastive topics are defined as elements that introduce alternatives that have no impact on the focus value but create oppositional pairs with respect to other topics (Kuno 1976; Büring 1997). In other words, contrastive topics refer to already activated actors in discourse, and different propositions are predicated about them in turn. An example illustrating the phenomenon is given in (33):

- (33)
- | | | | | | | | |
|-----|-----------|------------|-------|---------|-------|--------|----------|
| and | <i>he</i> | <i>him</i> | hæfde | geseald | apas | and | gislas, |
| and | he | him | had | given | oaths | and | hostages |
| 7 | se | cyng | him | eac | wel | feoh | sealde. |
| and | the | king | him | also | well | reward | gave |
- “and he [Hæsten] had given him [the king] oaths and hostages, and the king gave him [Hæsten] also a bountiful reward.”
(cochronA-2a, ChronA_[Plummer], 894.55.1060 in De Bastiani and Hinterhölzl 2020, 13)

As illustrated by the translation of the sentence in (33), the two active referents are ‘‘Haesten’’ and ‘‘the King’’; different actions are attributed to either one or the other, and for this reason they are labelled *Contrastive Topics*. These structures involve the attribution of a proposition to each of the active topics in turn, but these are not contrastively focused with each other.¹⁸ As can be observed from example (33), these pronouns are usually found before the inflected verb in OE prose. These are expected to have a different prosodic contour, based on investigations on spoken languages (Frascarelli and Hinterhölzl 2007). The contexts in which we can identify such turn taking pairings in *Beowulf* show that it is the second element that is placed on a lift, whereas the first one is placed on a dip, see (34):

(34)	250	wæpnum geweorðad. weapons honoured		Næfre him his wlite never him his appearance	leoge, lie
		ænic ansyn. unique appearance		x x s x s <i>Nu ic eower sceal</i>	
		frumcyn witan lineage know		Now I your shall	
‘‘[...] His unique appearance would never lie. But now I shall get to know your lineage.’’					

The possessive pronoun is placed on a verse lift and furthermore presents vocalic alliteration; both referents (‘‘I’’ and ‘‘you’’) are active and present in discourse. The interlocutor, after having described someone else’s appearance, declares that he shall now get to know his addressee’s lineage. The noun with which the possessive pronoun agrees is moved in the subsequent line, and establishes the alliterative pattern for it. This example is similar to example (33) above: the two discourse participants are active in discourse; they are not contrastively opposed to one another, rather, a different proposition is attributed to each of them. According to the data provided in *Beowulf*, then, it emerges that only one of the two elements in the pair is given prominence. The study of other poetic texts might provide more refined insights into this aspect.¹⁹ However, the study of how information structural categories interact with the metrical structure can help decide between two diverging scansions; in fact, the following example receives two different scansions, see (35):

(35)	Sievers:	x s x s x	
	Russom:	x x x s x	
	966	<i>Ic hine ne mihte,</i>	þa Metod nolde,
		I him not might	the Creator not.wanted
	gange(s) getwæman:	no ic him þæs georne ætfealh,	
	escape hinder	no I him this readily kept	
	feorhgeniðlan.		

¹⁸ The distinction of the several information structural categories is not always clear-cut in historical texts. Whereas spoken languages provide prosodic clues to the interpretation of such elements (e.g., contrastive ‘‘focus’’ prominence is stronger than prosodic contour on contrastive ‘‘topics’’), these need to be determined by analysing the context in which they occur. That is why metrical information is of such importance in these studies and should be considered in order to evaluate claims about prosodic prominence of historical texts.

¹⁹ It must be admitted, however, that the boundaries between shifting and contrastive topics are sometimes fuzzy, especially in historical texts.

mortal foe

“I might not deny him the escape, the Creator willed not! I did not keep him firmly, my mortal foe”.

According to Siever’s scansion, the accusative pronoun “hine” falls on a strong beat, whereas Russom’s scansion places both pronouns on an extended dip. Both referents are active, but in the direct speech uttered by the speaker attention shifts to the second element in the oppositional pair. The translation by Gummere seems to confirm this interpretation:

- (36) Him I might not -- the Maker willed not -- hinder from flight, and firm enough hold.
(Gummere 1910, 31, ll. 967-68)

The word order in the translation is marked in present-day English, since object pronouns are usually placed after the verb. This marked order is also corroborated by the information structural organization of the clause, which helps in this case both in interpreting the text and opting for a different verse scansion.

Summarising this second case study, it has been shown that the scrutiny of metrical structure can help shed light on the interpretation of a text and confirm hypotheses about the prosodic contour of certain information structural categories in historical stages of a given language. More specifically, also the text of *Beowulf* indicates that there is subdivision between a topic and a focus domain and that this division maps onto non-prominent and prominent verse positions respectively; this is in line with recent investigations on OE prose texts, although it must be noticed that the subject may precede the finite semi-auxiliary for reasons of alliteration, unlike what is observed in OE prose, where it is the verb that demarcates the topic from the focus domain (van Kemenade and Westergaard 2012). This might also be due to the fact that the V2 constraint had not developed yet in *Beowulf*, therefore, further investigations on OE poetry are needed to assess this correlation further. The assumption that contrastive focus and contrastive topics are prosodically more prominent is moreover confirmed by the study of object pronouns placed on verse lifts. When pronouns mark a contrast or a shift in reference, they are in fact placed on accented positions in the verse. This evidence provides therefore confirmation to assumptions made regarding OE prose texts, for which no direct indication about their prominence can be evinced.

Conclusions and Outlook

After having introduced the problems encountered in the study of historical varieties of a language, this paper presented two case studies aimed at determining the methodological import of studies that cross the borders between metrical structure, syntax and information structure. Section 1 started with the text of the *Ormulum*, which represents a specimen of a central language variety involved in the language change between and OV to a VO structure; this text shows a similar degree of word order variation with other coeval texts of the time. However, it has been shown that the syntax of the text is heavily constrained by its metrical structure. The investigation revolved around OV and VO structures and it was demonstrated that inverting the order of constituents in the sentence is either not compatible with the metrical structure or would violate the natural accentuation of certain words in the sentence. Furthermore, the positioning of object pronouns either before or after the non-finite verb clearly shows that the author exploited possible word orders permitted by his grammar and chose them in order for

them to fit in the metrical scheme. This does not mean that the text is not a valuable source of information about EME, but careful examination of this text is needed, in order to exclude the influence of non-linguistic factors over a certain syntactic choice. In fact, the evidence in this text tells us that the different syntactic structures encountered were certainly part of the author's grammar, but the choice of one word order sequence over the other is dictated by the author's wish to adhere to a precise metrical scheme. Moreover, the study of object pronouns in relation to their position in the metrical scheme shows in fact that when an object pronoun refers to a shift in reference, e.g. when the author directly addresses the audience, it is placed on a strong syllable in the verse. This piece of evidence shows that the metrical scheme is exploited in order to express emphasis on certain constituents, and is a valuable source of information regarding the correlation of information structural categories and their prosodic prominence.

This kind of evidence is further investigated in the text of *Beowulf*. Section 1.2 started with the scrutiny of sentences in which object pronouns are found before the semi-auxiliary verb. These sentences were chosen because the object is in a derived position, which is motivated by information structural reasons, according to recent investigations on prose texts. It was shown that most of the pronouns found in this position refer to the topic of the passage in which they are embedded. New information is added about this referent in the rest of the clause and this portion of the sentence furthermore coincides with alliterating positions in the verse. The composition of the verse confirms therefore the prosodic contour associated in the literature with topic-focus structures. When pronouns are placed on lifts, however, they mark a contrastive focus or a shift in reference. The mapping between information structural categories and metrical structure therefore provides confirmation to similar investigations performed on other kinds of texts, for which clear prosodic information is lacking.

Given the data presented in Section 1, we could ask ourselves the question whether poetic texts, or historical texts in general, do actually represent "bad data" after all. The answer depends on the use one makes of these data. This contribution has shown that taking into account the metrical structure in the study of poetic texts can not only shed light on the syntax of a work, but also provide valuable clues regarding the prosodic contour of utterances, thereby providing indirect confirmation to formal linguistic theories integrating prosody and information structure in the study of language change, and enlarging the set of methodological tools at the service of the historical linguist and philologist. In fact, the data examined show furthermore that structures generally attributed to stylistic factors are instead the consequence of an intricate interplay between syntax, meter and information structure. More research is needed in order to assess the role of this interplay further and its correlation with style and meter. In this way, new methodologies can be defined aimed at "making the best use of bad data" (Labov 1994).

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