On the Diachronic Development of the Syntax of Clauses in the English Language

Éva Kovács
Eszterházy Károly Catholic University (Eger, Hungary)
kovacs.eva@uni-eszterhazy.hu

The English language has gone through significant changes from Old English (450–1150) through Middle English (c. 1150–1500) and Early Modern English (1500-1750) to Modern English (1750–present) by becoming an analytic language from a synthetic language rich in inflections. Instead of inflections Present-Day English makes intensive use of prepositions and auxiliary verbs and depends upon word order to indicate syntactic relations in a sentence. The present paper discusses how English advanced from the free word order of Old English to the relatively fixed word order that is used in Present-Day English by touching upon noun declension, inversion and fronting, quoting examples from literature and popular culture.

Keywords: Old English, Middle English, Present-Day English, word order, inflection, inversion, fronting.

1 Introduction

Throughout its history English changed from a synthetic, inflecting language to an analytic language dependent on word order and prepositions for indicating the relationships among words in a sentence. There are several reasons for that (Millward 1989, 80 and 141, Baugh and Gable 1978, 55). One of the standard explanations is that exposed to the varying inflectional systems of three different languages (English, French and Scandinavian), inflections started to drop due to the necessity of adopting hundreds and even thousands of loanwords from two other inflecting languages, Old Norse and French, into English. The simplest solution was just to leave off inflections entirely. Thus, both French and Old Norse tended to support inflectional loss in English. Another important contributing factor to the loss of inflections in English was the phonological development of English, i.e., the reduction of all unstressed final vowels to /ə/. Thus, the information formerly carried by inflections was shifted to word order. By Old English (OE) times (approximately the period between 450–1150) the language had already developed relatively fixed word orders that indicated the function of words in a clause. Similarly, the increasing

https://doi.org/10.33035/EgerJES.2024.24.3

use of prepositions and particles helped carry most of the syntactical information formerly conveyed through inflections.

The primary aim of the paper is to explore the diachronic development of the syntax within clauses in English from Old English through Middle English (ME, approximately the period of 1150–1500) and Early Modern English (EMnE, approximately the period of 1500–1800) to Present-Day English (PDE, from 1800 to present) by focussing on changes of word order in clauses, touching upon noun declension, including the category of case marked by inflections, the loss of which resulted in a relatively fixed word order in English. Furthermore, I will also give an insight into inversion and fronting as used in literature and popular culture. However, a complete discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper and requires further research.

2 The Development of English from a Synthetic Language to an Analytic One

Unlike Present Day English, Old English was a synthetic language indicating the relations of words in a sentence largely by means of inflections. OE nouns were inflected for three genders (masculine, feminine and neuter), four cases: nominative (marking the subject), accusative (marking the direct object), genitive (possessive) and dative (marking the indirect object), and two numbers (singular and plural). In fact, there was also a fifth case, instrumental (for agency, instrument, or means), which was not different in form from the dative (and for this reason, in some books, the instrumental is not recognized as a separate case).

In addition to being inflected for gender, case and number, each OE noun belonged to one of several different classes, the vocalic *a*-stem masculine (e.g. *hund* 'dog') and neuter nouns (e.g. *sċip* 'boat', *hūs* 'house') and the vocalic *ō*-stem feminine nouns (e.g. *ġiefu* 'gift', *rād* 'ride') often called *strong nouns* and the consonantal *-an* declension, both masculine (e.g. *mōna* 'moon') and feminine (e.g. *sunne* 'sun'), the so called *weak nouns*, the remnants of which are *ox – oxen, brother – brethren* in PDE (Millward 1989, 82, Baugh and Cable 1978, 55–61).

However, nouns were not distinguished formally in all the cases. In most declensions 2 or even 3 forms were homonymous. In strong nouns the accusative was always identical to the nominative in the plural, but also in the singular for many classes of nouns, whereas weak masculine and feminine nouns had the same *-an* inflections in singular accusative, genitive and dative and plural nominative and accusative as illustrated by the strong *a*-stem masculine *stān* 'stone' and the weak *-an* declension masculine *nama* 'name' (Millward 1989, 82, Baugh and Cable 1978, 55–61). Consider the following:

Singular	N stān	nam-a
	G stān-es	nam-a
	D stān-e	nam-an
	A stān	nam-an
Plural	N stān-as	nam-an
	G stān-a	nam-an
	D stān-um	nam-ena
	A stān-as	nam-um

As mentioned above, fundamental changes were brought about by the Middle English period in the English language. Many Old English grammatical features were simplified or disappeared. In the case system of nouns, the weakness of the accusative must have contributed to its eventual loss. As for the dative case, by late OE, the *-um* of dative endings (pl. dative *namum* 'name', pl. dative *brycgum* 'bridge') had become *-un*. At about the same time, all the vowels of inflectional endings were reduced to /ə/, spelled *e*. Thus, *-um, -an* and *-en* became /ən/, usually spelled *-en.* Later, this final *-n* was also lost in most, though not all, noun endings. Finally, by late Middle English, final inflectional *-e* had dropped (Millward 1989, 142, Baugh and Cable 1978, 159–161). The result was only three different forms for nearly all nouns – essentially the state we have in English today. After the radical inflectional losses that characterised Middle English, in Early Modern English only the distinction between singular and plural remained, and cases were reduced to two – common case and possessive (genitive) case just like in PDE. The reduction in the number of case endings resulted in a loss in the distinction of grammatical gender as well. (Millward 1989, 227, Baugh and Cable 1978, 159–162, Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 457). Compare the declension of the former OE strong masculine *ā*-stem noun *stǭn* 'stone' and the former OE *n*-stem masculine weak noun *nama* 'name' in ME:

Singular	N stǭn	nām-e
	G stǭn-	nām-e
	D stǭn-(e)	nām-e
	A stǭn	nām-e
Plural	N stǭn-es	nām-en
	G stǭn-es	nām-ene
	D stǭn-es	nām-en
	A stǭn-es	nām-en

Of these categories it seems to be necessary to examine case in PDE, which – as defined by Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 455) – "applies to a system of inflectional

forms of a noun that serve to mark the function of a noun phrase (NP) relative to the construction containing it". Compare, for example:

	Function of NP	Case of pronoun
(1a) *I* slept soundly.	subject of clause	nominative
(1b) Please help *me.*	object of clause	accusative
(1c) Where is *my* bag?	subj-det of NP	genitive

The pronouns are head of NPs functioning in clause structure: the nominative *I* marks the subject, while accusative *me* marks the object. The primary function of the genitive is to mark one NP as a dependent in the structure of a larger NP. Huddleston and Pullum analyse the dependent NP as subject determiner within the matrix NP.

In PDE the contrast between nominative and accusative is found with only a handful of pronouns. At earlier stages of the language the contrast applied to the whole class of nouns, but the inflectional distinction has been lost except for a few pronouns, the personal pronouns *he/him* and the interrogative/relative pronoun *who/whom*.

Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 456) use the term 'plain case' for the form that neutralises the distinction between the nominative and the accusative, contrasting simply with the genitive:

	Function of NP	Case of pronoun
(2a) The doctor slept soundly.	subject of clause	plain
(2b) Please help the doctor.	object of clause	plain
(2c) the doctor's bag	subj-det of NP	genitive

Quirk et al. (1985, 318) distinguish between two cases of nouns as well: the unmarked common case and the marked genitive case. However, for pronouns they identify subjective and objective cases: *I/me, who/whom.* In their view, the normative grammatical tradition associates the subjective pronouns with the nominative case of pronouns in inflectional languages such as Latin, and the objective case with the oblique cases (especially accusative and dative cases) in such languages. Hence the subjective form appears not only in subject position, but in that of subject complement, as in *It's I/me* or *It was she/her who came,* with the accusative being more informal (Quirk et al. 1985, 338).

The situation with the interrogative or relative *who* is significantly different from that obtaining with the personal pronouns. Personal pronouns have the nominative as formal and the accusative as informal, but with *who* the alternations are typically between accusative *whom* as formal and nominative *who* as informal or relatively neutral (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 464), e.g.:

(3a) *Whom* did you meet? *Who* did you meet?
(3b) those *whom* we consulted those *who* we consulted

As mentioned above, the earlier case system of English distinguished not only nominative, accusative and genitive, but also dative (a case that characteristically serves to mark the indirect object and the object of certain prepositions). The loss of inflectional endings has resulted in the dative dropping out of the system altogether, for it is not even retained in the personal pronouns (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 464).

(4a) We took him to the zoo. (Direct object: accusative case)
(4b) We showed him the animal. (Indirect object: accusative case

As a result of the inflectional losses described above, the word order served to mark the syntactic functions of subject, and direct and indirect object in a clause by the EMnE period. Next let us examine the diachronic changes in word order in clauses in English.

3 Word Order in Old English

As stated by Millward (1989, 94–95), in OE there were six theoretically possible orders in which the clausal elements occurred: SVO, SOV, VSO, VOS, OSV and OVS, the first three being the most common. However, the order of elements was by no means random, but was governed by rules. The (a) OSV order and the (b) AVS order, which also occurred, are used in PDE mainly for focus or emphasis. Consider:

(5a) ðæt wat ælc mon. ('That knows every man.')
(5b) And egeslice spæc Gregorius be ðam, ('And sternly spoke Gregorius about that.')

However, in dependent clauses, the typical order was SOV, which is virtually impossible in PDE. The order VSO was the rule in (a) interrogative clauses and (b) imperative clauses with an expressed subject and in (c) declarative clauses preceded by an adverbial.

(6a) Hæfst ðu hafocas? ('Have you hawks?')
(6b) Ne sleh þū, Abraham, þīn āgen bearn. ('Not slay you, Abraham, your own son.')
(6c) Ðā cwæþ se fæder tō his þēowum… ('Then said the father to his servant...')

Of these three types of constructions, PDE regularly has auxiliary-subject inversion (a) in interrogative clauses and (b) it is obligatory after a preceding negative adverbial:

(7a) Why do you say that? Can you play backgammon?
(7b) Never have I seen such a mess.

In fact, word order in OE was in many ways similar to that of PDE. In particular, the subject usually preceded the verb, so the favourite order in independent declarative clauses was SVO, as it remained in PDE. As will be shown below, in PDE unconventional phrasing, such as the use of subject-auxiliary inversion, subject–dependent inversion and fronting an object, a complement or an adverbial is used in declarative clauses for effective, rhetorical purposes, frequently occurring in formal contexts and literature but occasionally also in everyday speech.

4 Word Order in Middle English

As pointed out above, the Middle English period was marked by significant changes in the English language, making English from a highly inflected language to an extremely analytic one due to the rapid and drastic loss of inflections (cf. Millward 1989, 162–63, Baugh and Cable 1978, 159–163). We find the continuation of some OE patterns different from those of PDE, but the trend was toward modern word order and by the end of ME, PDE patterns were firmly established.

For affirmative independent clauses, the SVO pattern was, as it has always been in English, the most common. Unlike OE, however, the SVO pattern was frequent after (a) adverbials and in (b) dependent clauses, including (c) indirect questions as well:

(8a) In the contre of Ethyop *they slen here childeryn* byforn here goddys.
('In the country of Ethiopia they slay their children in front of their gods.')
(8b) Þe taverne ys þe scole of þe dyevle *huere his deciples studieþ*.
('The tavern is the school of the devil where his disciples study.')
(8c) Men askede hire *how scho myghte swa lyffe*. ('People asked her how she could thus live.')

The SOV pattern, which is impossible in PDE, can at least occasionally be found throughout the entire ME period. The OSV and CSV patterns were a fairly common means of emphasising (a) the direct object or (b) the complement, respectively:

(9a) This bok I haue mad and wretyn. ('This book I have made and written.')
(9b) Merchaunt he was in his Zonghede. ('Merchant he was in his youth.')

Another common variant was the (O)VS pattern:

(10a) Clothis have they none but of skynnys of bestis.
('Clothes have they none except of the skins of beast.')

As was pointed out by Millward (1989, 240), most of the PDE patterns of subject (S), verb (V), and object/complement (O) were established by the end of ME. In EMnE, especially by the 17th century, the SVO pattern was regular in both independent and dependent declaratives clauses, as in *I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing*. It is worth mentioning here that it was quite common in the Old English and Middle English times for a clause to contain more than one negation, which was lost in the Modern English period (Baugh and Cable 1978, 248).

The SOV pattern was still an available option during most of the EMnE period, for pronoun objects and for emphasis, particularly in dependent clauses, as in *As the law should them direct*. Just as in PDE, the VSO pattern was regular in (a) open-ended questions and (b) conditional clauses:

(11a) What desireth God of me? Why askst thou?
(11b) Were he my kinsman… It should be thus with him.

Unlike PDE, imperatives in EMnE frequently had an expressed subject, as in the following example: *Go, go, my servant, take thou Troilus' horse.* The subject-verb inversion that was so common in Old English and that is encountered frequently in Present-Day English is rarely found in ME. In fact, it declined substantially.

5 Word Order in Present-Day English

As seen above, throughout the history of English, the SVO word order has always been the favourite for declarative statements in independent clauses. As far as interrogatives in PDE are concerned, both (a) closed interrogatives and (b) non-subject open-interrogatives require subject-auxiliary inversion (Quirk et al. 1985, 806–27, Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 856).

(12a) Did they see her?
(12b) Which one did they choose?

However, besides interrogatives inversion is also used in various other constructions in PDE. Since EMnE the language has lost the option of VSO pattern after a non-negative adverbial. PDE does not use SVO order in a clause that begins with (a) a negative adverbial or even (b) a negative object; subject–auxiliary inversion to VSO (the movement of an auxiliary verb to a position in front of the subject of a main clause) is often required (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002: 96, Quirk et al., 1985: 779), as illustrated in:

(13a) Nowhere *does he* mention my book.
(13b) Not one of them *did he* find useful.

Besides, as was mentioned above, there are several other adverbials and determiners which are negative in meaning but not in form, causing subject–operator inversion when they are positioned initially, such as *seldom, rarely, scarcely, hardly little* and *few*, characteristically in literary and oratorical style (Quirk et al. 1985, 780–81), as in:

(14a) Rarely *does crime pay* so well as many people think.
(14b*) Scarcely ever has the British nation suffered* so much obloquy.
(14c) Little *did I expect* such enthusiasm for so many.

Nor and *neither* used as negative additive adverbs also require subject–operator inversion when they introduce a clause, a feature which they share with a negative adjunct in the examples above, and they generally presuppose a previous negative clause (Quirk et al. 1985, 937, Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1309), as in:

(15a) The Germans haven't yet replied*;* nor/neither *have the French*.

Similarly, subject–operator inversion is used after *only*, which behaves just like a negative element and after initial *so/such* as well. For example,

(16a) Only two of them *did he find* useful.
(16b) So little time *did we have* that we had to cut corners.
(16c) Such a fuss *would he make* that we'd all agree.

Subject–operator inversion with optative *may*, which expresses (a) hope or wish also generally belongs to formal style. In fact, wish or hope is also conveyed by (b)

the formulaic subjunctive, which also tends to be formal and rather old-fashioned (Quirk et al. 1985, 224, Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 944). Compare:

(17a) *May God* bless you. Long *may the queen* live.
(17b) God *bless* you. Long *live* the queen.

Subject–auxiliary inversion also occurs in subordinate clauses of condition with the omission of *if* and in concession cluses, especially in rather formal usage (Quirk et al. 1985, 1382, Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 753):

(18a) *Were she* alive today, she would grieve at the changes.
(18b) *Had I known,* I would have gone to her.
(18c) *Even had the building been* open, we would not have entered.

As noted by Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 857), exclamative clauses usually have (a) the exclamatory phrase–subject–verb order. However, (b) subject postponing and (c) subject-auxiliary inversion are also possible, as illustrated in:

(19a) How polite they are! What a disaster it was!
(19b) How great would there be *their embarrassment* if the error was detected.
(19c) How happy *would he be* if he could see her once more.

In relatively formal style inversion may also occur following the preposing of a wide variety of elements (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 96, Carter and McCarthy 2006, 778–82), as in:

(20a) Thus *had they parted* the previous evening.
(20b) Tourism will continue to grow. Particularly *is this the case* of Queensland.
(20c) Many another poem *could I speak* of which sang itself into my heart.
(20d) Well *did I remember* the crisis of emotion into which he was plunged that night.

Besides subject–auxiliary inversion, there is another type of inversion, the so-called subject–dependent inversion, i.e., inversion of the subject and another dependent of the verb, in (a) CVS and (b) AVS, placing emphasis on the subject complement or the adverbial (Quirk et al. 1985, 1379–80, Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1385–90, Carter and McCarthy 2006, 778–82). However, as noted by both Quirk et al. and Huddleston and Pullum, this type of inversion can be mannered in tone, often poetic and commonly used in narrative contexts. As examples consider:

(21a) *Especially remarkable* was her oval face.
(21b) *In a distant grave* lies his beloved body.

Preposing adverbials in ASV is a common phenomenon in ordinary informal speech as well (Quirk et al. 1985, 1380) as shown in:

(22a) *Here* comes my brother.
(22b) *Down* came the rain.
(22c) *Up* went the flag.

However, they more frequently occur in written, formal style such as:

(23a) *Slowly out of the hangar* rolled the gigantic aircraft.
(23b) *There at the summit* stood the castle in all its medieval splendour.

Preposing a clausal element, such as a complement or adverbial has pragmatic constraints: the preposed element is discourse-old while the postposed element is discourse new. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1386–87).

In existential sentences with *there,* typically followed by intransitive verbs, inverted word order also serves to bring something on to the discoursal stage (Quirk et al. 1985, 1408), Examples, characteristic of literary style, include:

(24a) *There rose* in his imagination *grand visions of a world empire*.
(24b) *There exist a number of similar medieval crosses* in different parts of the country.

However, such inversion may occur in informal style as well as:

(25a) I opened the door and *there stood Michael*, all covered in mud.
(25b) She looked out and *there was Pamela*, walking along arm in arm with Goldie.

The construction *Here/There* + BE + Subject is used as a stylistic device for presenting a personal narrative in a vivid way (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1390).

(26a) [viewing a photograph] *Here's/There's me*, when I was six.
(26b) *Here's/There's the money* I owe.

The expressions *Here* + Subject + BE and *There* + Subject + BE with a personal pronoun as subject and with the adverbial being fronted are commonly used to draw attention to the presence of somebody or something (Quirk et al. 1985, 512), as given in:

(27a) *Here it is*, just where I left it.
(27b) *There she is*, by the phone box.

Besides subject–auxiliary inversion and subject–dependent inversion, fronting. i.e., moving an element of the clause into initial position often occurs both in informal spoken PDE and in formal style, especially "in the heightened language of rather mannered rhetoric, including the strenuous colourfulness of journalistic writing" (Quirk et al. 1985, 1377–79). Fronting typically involves moving objects, complements or adjuncts to front position in a clause, which, in unmarked word order, is typically occupied by the subject in PDE.

The marked (untypical) word order may be used for a variety of purposes, such as introducing new topics, distinguishing between new and old information, flagging or highlighting the importance of something, foregrounding some things and backgrounding others. In fact, the OSV and ASV order was a common phenomenon in both OE and ME. Consider the following examples for (a) OSV and (b) ASV in PDE (Quirk et al. 1985, 1377–79, Carter and McCarthy 2006, 778–82):

(28a) *Soup* are you making? Vow, lovely. *His face* not many admired while *his character* still fewer could praise.
(28b) *Without my glasses* I can't see anything. *Defiantly* they have spoken but *submissively* they will accept my terms.

Even (a) subject complements, (b) object complements and (c) objects of prepositional verbs may be fronted for focus or contrast, especially in spoken language. However, this kind of fronting is not confined to colloquial speech, it is very common in conventional written style as well (Carter and McCarthy 2006, 778–82, Quirk et al. 1985, 1377–79), as in:

(29a) Mm, *my very first car*, that was. *Traitor* he has become and *traitor* we shall call him.
(29b) *'Ray the Bookie'* we used to call him.
(29c) *The other list* we can look at later. *To this list* may be added ten further items of importance.

Occasionally a non-finite predicate, i.e., an infinitive predicate, an *ed*-predicate or an *ing*-predicate also occurs in initial position to give end-focus to the subject, which is very common in journalism (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 1385–86, Carter and McCarthy 2006, 778–82, Quirk et al. 1985, 1378–79).

(30a) I had said he would come down and *come down* he did.
(30b) Also *billed* to appear as a special mystery guest is Vivacious Val.
(30c) *Coming* to Belfast this month are The Breeders and The Levellers.

Occasionally, an auxiliary and a lexical verb may be fronted, which typically occurs in spoken language (Carter and McCarthy 2006, 782):

(31) Why didn't you phone your mother? *Been really panicking* she has.

However, we can find examples for it in informal style as well, such as *Sitting in the garden I've been, all morning* (Carter and McCarthy 2006, 782).

As far as objects are concerned, since OE times, when both a direct and an indirect object are present in a clause, English has preferred the order IO – DO. Of the two types of object, the direct object occurs in both monotransitive and ditransitive clauses, whereas the indirect object occurs only in ditransitive ones. As defined by Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 244–45), "the direct object expresses the patient while the indirect object is characteristically associated with the semantic role of recipient in clause structure". In languages with richer case systems than English, such as German, direct and indirect objects are characteristically marked by the accusative and the dative case, respectively. As was mentioned above, English has lost its earlier dative case, so that the two types of object are somewhat more alike than in such languages.

The relative order of the two objects is fixed, with IO preceding DO. If we switch the order of the two NPs, we change their functions, yielding a clause with a quite different meaning or else an anomaly (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 248):

(32a) They offered all the overseas students one of the experienced tutors. [IO – DO]
They offered one of the experienced tutors all the overseas students. [IO – DO]
(32b) He gave Sue the key. [IO – DO]
*He gave the key Sue. [anomalous]

In the latter example the switch results in anomaly, because in the great majority of such clauses the IO is human (or at least animate) and thus an inanimate IO is anomalous.

As noted by Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 248), some varieties of English, particularly BrE varieties, allow the order DO – IO when both objects are personal pronouns, as in *He gave it her* rather than the more widespread *He gave her it*.

However, when both DO and IO are pronouns, it would be usual to replace the latter by a PP with *to* (Quirk et al. 1985, 1396). Compare, for example:

(33a) She gave it her.
(33b) She gave it to her.

In fact, most ditransitive clauses have alternants with a single object and a PP complement with *to* or *for* as head:

(34a) I sent Sue a copy.	I sent a copy to Sue.
(34b) I ordered Sue a copy.	I ordered a copy for Sue.

Eventive objects represent a special type of ditransitive construction (Quirk et al. 1985, 1396). The order of the two objects depends on whether we put the focal emphasis on (a) the activity or (b) on a human participant. Consider the following examples:

(35a) We paid them a visit.
(35b) We paid a visit to some old friends.

As the examples above show, PDE frequently uses both types of inversion, i.e., the subject–auxiliary inversion and subject–dependent inversion and fronting as well for various reasons, primarily to place emphasis on certain clausal elements. Nevertheless, such clause constructions differ syntactically from the most basic, or canonical clause types, SV, SVC, SVA, SVO, SVOC, SVOA, SVOO (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 46–50, 1365–67). The rearrangement of clausal elements serves to add emphasis and to give special effect. Although inversion is a common phenomenon in English sentences, it is not so much used in everyday speech, but it is more often found in written English and in formal style. Consequently, it is generally used in literature for emphasis or for special effect.

6 Inversion in literature and popular culture

The use of inversion is an important stylistic technique in literature, both in prose and poetry. Inversion is defined as follows (Literary Devices 2023):

> Inversion involves reversing the usual word order of a sentence to create a different effect or

> emphasis. This can involve placing the verb before the subject or using a different word order to create a more dramatic or poetic effect. Inversion can be used to create emphasis, suspense, or to draw attention to a particular word or phrase.

In fact, in literature the term *anastrophe* is more commonly used for inversion (Baldick 2001, 36; Wikimedia Foundation 2024). It comes from Greek, meaning 'a turning back or about' and is a figure of speech in which the normal word order of the subject, the verb, and the object is changed, emphasizing the displaced word or phrase.

Writers purposefully rearrange clausal elements in a non-traditional order to achieve some special artistic effects. It allows them to organize thoughts in an interesting way, to lay an emphasis on certain ideas and to make the reader pay more attention to the foregrounded elements. It can be illustrated by the following examples taken from a novel titled *For my daughters* (1994) written by a contemporary American author, Barbara Delinsky, who very often uses unconventional phrasing, including (a) subject–dependent inversion such as fronted adverbials, typically expressed by a PP or an AdvP, or a subject complement realised by an AdjP, (b) subject–auxiliary inversion, most frequently with a phrase or clause of negative or restrictive meaning, conditional clauses with the omission of *if* or after the negator *nor* and *neither* or (c) fronting the complementation of a noun or the complementation of a verb or the verb itself without using inversion for emphasis:

(36a) *With that thought* came the realisation that she hadn't yet seen the day's mail. (32)
Straight ahead and alone was a sleeping loft. (103)
Along with mellowness came infinite patience. (161)
Inside were portraits. (98)
Warm and fuzzy was the kind of kiss that was so gentle and sweet you wanted to melt. (245)
(36b) *Rarely* did a week go by when he wasn't in touch with the research station. (89)
Only recently had Leah come to understand that. (33)
Only when she had both bags did she head for the door. (50)
Only through passion could she say all she felt. (176)
Had I been of my daughters' generation, I would never have returned to the city with Nick. (155)
Nor did talk of moving to New York do anything to dampen the feeling. (245)
He didn't balance the book. *Neither* did my mother. (328)
(36c) At that moment, *on that matter* she had no doubt (106)
A sad day it was when she'd closed the place down. (156)

Cold we don't need. *Wind* we do, as long as it's gentle. (218)
On their far side, she stopped. (114)
So in love I was with him by this time. (219)
He hadn't planned asking but *there* it was. (217)

In her novels Delinsky also uses the reversal of the lexical verb and the subject, as in *Come fall she would have a job* (241), or preposing an auxiliary in exclamations, e.g. *Vow, did she love those stories* (245). In fact, stylistic inversion used by writers in Modern English cannot be regarded as a violation of the norms of standard English but as an expressive means of the language creating a variety of rhetorical effects.

Used as a stylistic device, inversion is prevalent not only in prose but in poetry as well. As defined by Baldick (2001, 129), "inversion of word-order is a common form of poetic licence allowing a poet to preserve the rhyme scheme or the metre of a verse line, or to place special emphasis on particular words". The term *poetic licence* describes "the freedom an artist or writer has to change details, distort facts, or ignore the usual rules – especially if the art they produce is better as a result". (Vocabulary.com 2025). For example, in both his poems and his plays, Shakespeare (1564–1616) often rearranges clausal elements to create dramatic effect. The following patterns of stylistic inversion can be identified in his sonnets: (a) the object is placed in clause-initial position, (b) the adverbial is placed in initial position with subject–verb inversion or subject–auxiliary verb inversion, (c) the predicate is placed before the subject and d) the non-finite verb precedes the auxiliary verb, with the word order in (a) and (b) being the most common. In fact, inversion enabled him to follow the specific rhythm and rhyme scheme required in this form of poetry and to add emotional colouring to it. In fact, sonnets are traditionally used to convey the idea of love. Consider the following examples for inversion and fronting in Shakespeare's sonnets (Kerrigan 1995, 77–152):

(37a) *Full many a glorious morning* have I seen (Sonnet 33)
Him have I lost; thou hast both him and me (Sonnet 134)
*But no such ros*es see I in her cheeks (Sonnet 130)
So *him* I lose through my unkind abuse (Sonnet 134)
Two loves I have, of comfort and despair (Sonnet 144)
Me from myself thy cruel eye hath taken (Sonnet 133)
This silence for my sin you did impute (Sonnet 83)
Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burned (Sonnet 104)
(37b) *With virtuous wish* would bear your living flowers (Sonnet 16)
Not from the stars do I my judgment pluck (Sonnet 14)
In other accents do this praise confound (Sonnet 69)

In process of the seasons have I seen (Sonnet 104)
Herein lives wisdom, beauty, and increase (Sonnet 11)
Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burned (Sonnet 104)
In so profound abysm I throw all care (Sonnet 112)
But *from thine eyes* my knowledge I derive (Sonnet 14)
And from the forlorn world his visage hide (Sonnet 33)
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day (Sonnet 73)
(37c) *Gentle* thou art, and therefore to be won (Sonnet 41)
Better becomes the gray cheeks of the east *(Sonnet 132)*
Past cure I am, now reason is past care (Sonnet 147)
(37d) *Suspect* I may, yet not directly tell (Sonnet 144)

As even these few examples show, the language used by Shakespeare, referred to as Early Modern English, dated from around 1500, was in many respects very close to the language that is used today.

Roughly 200 years later, John Keats (1795–1821), one of the best-known poets of Romanticism, a representative of the Early Modern English period and a great admirer of Shakespeare, also made use of the poetic technique of inversion and fronting in his odes and sonnets. Consider the examples in italics in Keats' poem titled "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (1816) (Bullet and Gittings 1974, 35):

Much *have I travell'd* in the realms of gold
And many *goodly states and kingdoms seen*;
Round many western islands *have I been*
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse *had I been told*
That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet *did I never breathe* its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then *felt I* like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;

On the one hand, the unconventional rearranging of clausal elements helps Keats to maintain the rhyme schemes and metrical patterns in his sonnet, which contributes to its the melodic nature. On the other hand, it captivates the reader and enhances the meaning or emotion the poet is trying to achieve.

Besides literature, anastrophe also occurs in popular culture, like films. A good example for that is the language used by Yoda, one of the most iconic and wise characters from the *Star Wars* series, who uses an unusual speech pattern inverting

the typical English syntax, which highlights his intelligence and allows for his wise words to stand out to the audience. Much of this wisdom is captured in wise Yoda quotes, some of which have even found their way into everyday speech. Of the most common inverted sentence patterns used in OE and ME, the (a) OSV, (b) CSV, (c) AVS and (d) VS(A) patterns can be identified in Yoda's use of inverted syntax. Consider the following examples (Parade 2024):

(38a) *Patienc*e you must have my young Padawan.
Your path you must decide.
The dark side I sense in you.
A different game you should play.

(38b) *Truly wonderful,* the mind of a child is.
Smaller in number are we, but larger in mind.
Powerful you have become.
The greatest teacher, failure is.

(38c) *On many long* journeys have I gone"
Soon will I rest, yes, forever sleep. Earned it I have.
Out of acceptance comes wisdom.

(38d) *Happens* to every guy sometimes this does.
Named must your fear be before *banish* it you can.
Close your mouth and *open* your ears, you must.

Even these few examples demonstrate that inversion, also known as anastrophe, is not only a device commonly used by writers or poets but is gaining ground in popular culture as well. By deviating from the normal word order, authors achieve emphasis that creates a special effect on the reader or the viewer. In fact, the word order used by Yoda shows a lot of similarities to the inverted sentence patterns so characteristic of the language in which Shakespeare wrote.

7 Conclusion

As has been seen in the above analysis, word order in Old English was more flexible than in modern English, due to the fact that OE had a rich inflectional system. However, most of the inflections that characterised Old English and the early period

of Middle English had been lost by the time of Early Modern English. The base word order of Old English was SVO, with the occasional appearance of the VSO, SOV, OSV and OVS patterns. The SVO pattern dominated in the main clauses while the SOV pattern was common in subordinate or embedded clauses.

Middle English was characterised by the decline of inflections and the simplification of the case system in nouns, which had an impact on the word order. SVO was the dominant word order in Middle English in both main and embedded clauses and has continued to do so until today. The SOV pattern still appeared in Early Middle English, but it had completely disappeared from the language by the Modern English period. Since EMnE, the language has lost the option of the VSO pattern after a nonnegative adverbial or object. PDE cannot use the SVO pattern in a clause that begins with a negative adverbial or a negative form or meaning; subject-auxiliary inversion is now required, which is typically used in formal, literary style, such as in *Never had they seen so many people in the village* or *Not a single word did he say.* Subject–auxiliary inversion also occurs in subordinate clauses of condition and concession, especially in rather formal usage. (E.g., *Were that to be happen we would be in a very difficult situation, Had I known I would have gone to her*.) The other kind of inversion, reversal of subject and verb, used mainly in the CVS and AVS patterns occurs in PDE when emphasis is placed on the subject complement, as in *A thorough rogue was James Bacharach*, or the adverbial, as in *Under the bed were the children's toys* or *The following morning came the news of her father's arrest*, being also primarily characteristic of written formal English. For emphasis or focus fronting is also frequently used in written literary and formal contexts, especially in journalism, but in informal spoken English as well. The fronted element is typically an adjunct (*He might agree under pressure: willingly he never would*), a subject complement (*Faint grew the sound of the bell*), an object (*This one she accepted*) or a predication (*There is no greater honour than to serve them and serve them they will*).

Since OE times, when both a direct and an indirect object are present in a clause, the indirect object has usually preceded the direct object. Like in present-day German, in OE direct objects took the accusative case and indirect objects the dative case both for nouns and pronouns, the latter completely disappearing in Modern English even for pronouns (*We took him to the zoo, We showed him the animals*).

As noted above, inversion (also referred to as anastrophe) is also a literary device used by poets, writers and even by characters in films when they deviate from the norms of syntax by re-sequencing of clausal elements and changing the normal word order. The use of this stylistic device enables writers to place emphasis on important subject matters, to achieve a dramatic and impressive effect and add variety to their writing. It helps writers to bring attention to a particular point or change the focus of the readers from a particular point. Besides, inversion is also

widely used by poets to maintain the meter of a poem, to keep the rhythm or make a rhyme, or because it generates some special meaning in the poem evoking emotions and thoughts in the reader. In the *Star Wars* series, representing popular culture, the inverted syntax that Yoda, one of the most beloved characters of the series, uses helps the viewers to understand the messages that he tries to convey and creates a lasting impact on them. In fact, for pragmatic purposes people use inversion in everyday informal speech as well, when wanting to place emphasis on a certain word in the clause, as in *Time I have, money I don't; Scared I was* or *Here comes the bus*.

In this paper I attempted to show how the word order in clauses changed, with the SVO pattern becoming prevalent in declarative statements in independent clauses over times, due to the loss of inflections of nouns throughout the diachronic development of the English language. Hopefully my study has contributed to a better understanding of clause structure in Present-Day English.

Works Cited

Baldick, Chris, ed. 2001. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Baugh, Albert C. and Cable, Thomas. 1978. *A History of the English Language*. Third Edition. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall International, Inc.

Bullet, Gerald and Gittings, Robert, eds. 1974. *John Keats. Poems.* London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd.

Carter, Ronald and McCarthy, Michael. 2006. *Cambridge Grammar of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cuddon, John A. and Habib, M. A. R., eds. 2013. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Fifth edition. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118325988

Delinsky, Barbara. 1994. *For My Daughters*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher.

Huddleston, Rodney and Pullum, Geoffrey K. 2002. *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316423530

Kerrigan. John, ed. 1995. *William Shakespeare. The Sonnets and Lover's Complaint*. London: Penguin Books.

Literary Devices. 2023. "Inversion." https://literary-devices.com/inversion.

Millward, Celia, M. 1989. *A Biography of the English Language*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

Parade. 2024 “40 Yoda Quotes That Will Leave You With All the ‘Star Wars’ Feels.” https://parade.com/943548/parade/yoda-quotes.

Quirk, Randolph, Greenbaum, Sidney, Leech, Geoffrey & Svartvik, Jan. 1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.

Vocabulary.com. 2025. “Poetic license.” https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/poetic%20license.

Wikimedia Foundation. 2024. “Wikipedia: Old English grammar.” Last modified 11 November 2024, at 19:29 (UTC). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_English_grammar.