LABILE VERBS AND WORD ORDER IN EARLY MIDDLE ENGLISH: AN INITIAL STUDY[1]

Abstract: This paper serves as an initial exploration of the hypothesis put forth by García García (2012) according to which morphological syncretism in the expression of valency in causative pairs may have a connection with syntactic parameters, specifically the overt expression of all verbal arguments and a fixed or consistent word order. In this paper we assess the relative position of subject-verb and verb-object in early Middle English transitive and intransitive clauses containing *melten*, *(a)quenchen*, and *burnen* and compare them with those with a transitive- and intransitive-only verb respectively. The most outstanding result shows that labile verbs used transitively seem to anticipate the VO order that will become generalized in later stages of English. **Keywords:** Word order, early Middle English, causatives, labile verbs, morphological loss, valency changes, English syntax.

Abstract: Este artículo es una investigación inicial de la hipótesis expuesta por García García (2012) según la cual el sincretismo morfológico en la expresión de la valencia en las parejas de causativos puede estar relacionado con algunos parámetros sintácticos, más concretamente la expresión de todos los argumentos verbales y un orden de palabras fijo o consistente. En este artículo evaluamos la posición relativa de sujeto y verbo y verbo y objeto en cláusulas transitivas e intransitivas que contienen los verbos *melten*, *(a)quenchen* y *burnen* en inglés medio temprano y realizamos una comparación con cláusulas con un verbo exclusivamente transitivo o intransitivo respectivamente. El resultado más relevante muestra que los verbos lábiles usados transitivamente parecen adelantarse al orden de palabras VO que se generalizará en posteriores periodos del inglés. **Palabras clave:** Orden de palabras, inglés medio temprano, causativos, verbos lábiles, pérdida morfológica, cambios de valencia, sintaxis inglesa.

1 Introduction

Probably one of the aspects of the history of English that has attracted most interest has been the processes of morphological simplification undergone by this language from its origins until the present day. Special attention has been paid to nominal morphology, particularly the loss of gender and case during the Middle English period. The possible relationship

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between these phenomena and a less free word order has been extensively researched by scholars, such as Allen (2006), Fischer *et al.* (2006), Fischer (1992), Hickey (2002), Lass (1997), Pintzuk (2002b), Traugott (1972), among many others.

However, the morphological simplification undergone by English is not restricted to the aforementioned instances. Derivational morphology has also been subject to syncretism. One such process affects the expression of verbal valency, specifically of the inchoative-causative alternation in the history of English, on which we focus in this paper.[2] Loss of derivational morphology has not received as much attention as might be expected. The study that we present here constitutes an attempt to start filling in the gap that other studies on morphological loss have not yet covered.

The aim of this paper is to present the first results of an on-going research project on the effect of syncretism in the expression of verbal valency on word order in English. Some of the theoretical foundations for the project can be found in García García (2012). We will summarize them in Sections 2 and 3 below. At this stage of the project our aim is to be as descriptive as possible, so that our results may be useful for scholars from different theoretical backgrounds.

The paper has five sections. First, we will explain the process of morphological loss in Old English causative verbs that leads to an increase in the use of an invariant verbal form for both the intransitive and causative sense of a causative opposition. This invariant form is what we call "labile verb" (following Haspelmath 1993: 90). Second, we will explain how the use of labile verbs might affect syntactic parameters, word order in particular. The third section will be devoted to the presentation of the data and of the methodology that we follow in our analysis. Fourth, we will show the results of the analysis. In a final section we summarize the main conclusions of the study.

[2] To the inchoative-causative alternation in English see Levin (1993). For a typological study of the alternation see Haspelmath (1993).

2 Morphological loss in Old English causatives

In this section of the paper we give a brief overview of the formation of morphological causatives in Germanic. Though rare in Present-day European languages, several causative formations have been reconstructed for Proto-Indoeuropean, among them the Germanic *jan*-formation. In Germanic, the suffix **-(i)ja-* was generally attached to the past singular grade of a strong verb to form a derived causative, which was ascribed to the first class of weak verbs. The following (after Ringe 2006: 252–253) are some examples from which Present-day English *drink* / *drench, lie* / *lay* and *sit* / *set* stem.

(1) **drinkana* vs. **drankijana*
**ligjana* vs. **lagjana*
**sitjana* vs. **satjana*

Despite the productivity of this formation in the Germanic protolanguage, it was subject to erosion and ultimate loss later on in the history of the language family. Several aspects, phonological, semantic and syntactic in nature, beginning in the pre-historical Old English period were involved in the dissolution of causative pairs. These are described in García García (2012: 135–138).

In this paper we are concerned with a syntactic process which García García (2012: 137) calls "syntactic melting" or "fusion." With this name she refers to cases in which one or both of the members of a causative pair take on a further valency value, namely that of its partner. This process results into redundancy and the eventual loss of one of the verbs. She explains that this "process only affects pairs in which the base is an intransitive verb, and it consists in the base adding a transitive-causative usage (that is, a causing subject) to its valency frame and/or the *jan*-derivative an intransitive usage." Two examples follow (García García 2012: 137):

(2) a) OE *myltan* "melt" (caus. and intr.) < Gmc **maltija*- "melt" (caus.)
b) OE *meltan* "melt" (intr.) < Gmc **melta*- "melt" (intr.)

(3) a) OE *hwyrfan* "go, move about, return" (intr.); "turn, change" (caus. and intr.) < Gmc **hwarƀija*- "turn" (caus.)
b) OE *hweorfan* "go; turn, change" (mostly intr.) < Gmc **hwerfa*- "turn" (intr.)

These examples show how two Old English verbs (*myltan* and *hwyrfan*), which were originally used in a causative sense only, have acquired an intransitive use; they can be used both in an intransitive or causative sense with no morphological marking, i.e. they are labile.

The demise of the causative formation does not conclude in the Old English period. Causative verb pairs of the Germanic type described above decrease dramatically in Middle English. Whereas in Old English 57 *jan*-causative pairs can be safely traced, only 12 survive in Middle English, when many of the former causative oppositions have become labile verbs (García García forthcoming).

3 Connection between labile verbs and syntactic parameters

As pointed out in the introduction, numerous studies have connected the fixation of word order in (late) Middle English to the loss of inflections. Against a widely held opinion, Pintzuk (2002b) argues that word order changes are not related to (the loss of) case marking in Old English. Her conclusions are convincing, at least in the scope of her corpus, which consists of Old English clauses with non-finite main verbs and NP objects. As she shows in her Table 1, V(erb)O(bject) order increases in Old English (24.3% in texts composed before 950, against 44.8% after 950). She shows that clauses with morphologically ambiguous objects do not have more incidence of VO (389–392). She concludes that the position of objects is determined by other factors, such as "heaviness and

clause type and structure" (381). Pintzuk & Taylor (2006) endorse Pintzuk's view of the change from OV to VO in Middle English as a result of grammatical competition between two parameter settings, together with constraints that affect constituent movement within each setting (Pintzuk 1999, 2002a). According to these researchers, both the changes in underlying order and the decrease of possible movements that result in different surface positions are gradual processes that begin in Old English and result in the loss of OV order in the late Middle English period.

In this study we aim to assess whether the loss of overt valency marking might have influenced the increase and final fixation of VO order in early English. We focus on the possible connections between the abundance of labile verbs in English (already noted by Poppe 2009 or Haspelmath 1993) and the loss of morphological distinctions in causative oppositions on the one hand, and syntactic developments on the other, more specifically the obligatory expression of all verbal arguments and a fixed or at least consistent word order, in which a certain element order is expected. This need not be (S)VO, but it is in the case of English (see Fischer & van der Wurff 2006: 188) on the difference between English and Dutch in this respect.

We can illustrate that both might be connected if we contrast English with a language with few labile verbs, such as Spanish. The inchoative-causative alternation expressed in English by the labile verb *melt* is expressed in Spanish by means of an anti-causative opposition, *derretir* ("melt (something)," causative) and *derretirse* ("melt," intransitive). In (4) and (5) we have included an intransitive (a) and a causative (b) clause with the verb "melt" in Spanish and English respectively; the subjects have been underlined and a word-by-word translation of the Spanish original is given in italics:

(4) a) Después del amanecer, se derritió el muñeco de nieve.
After dawn, melted the snowman.
"After dawn, the snowman melted."

b) Después del amanecer, ø derritió el muñeco de nieve.
After dawn, ø melted the snowman.
"After dawn, he/she/it melted the snowman."

(5) a) After dawn, the snowman melted.
b) After dawn, he/she/it melted the snowman.

Examples (4a) and (4b) intend to make clear that the valency alternation needs to be morphologically marked in Spanish (*derretir* vs. *derretirse*) so as not to render the sentence ambiguous. This is so for two reasons. Overt subjects can be omitted in Spanish as it is a pro-drop language. Further, subjects may precede or follow the verb. Hence, both (4a) and (4b) could be interpreted as either "the snowman melted" or "someone/something (just mentioned) melted the snowman," if valency (intransitive vs. causative) was not marked in the verb itself. The case of English is different, though. Marking the valency in the verb itself is not indispensable because English makes use of syntactic resources at clause level to avoid ambiguity between sentences in (5), namely overt subjects and a fixed word order. It is plausible then to expect the surge in the replacement of causative by labile oppositions in early English to have had some effects in the consolidation of the two syntactic parameters just mentioned. This connection may shed some light on the assessment of the fixation of word order in English from a perspective different to that provided by loss of overt case marking mentioned at the beginning of this section.

4 Methodology of the study

In the present section we will introduce the criteria taken into account in the selection of data, together with an explanation of the methodology applied in this study. We have chosen the early Middle English period as the focus of our study. Even if, as has been pointed out, several of the changes we have discussed, such as the reduction in nominal morphology or the syncretism undergone

by derivational morphology in the inchoative-causative alternation, begin to take place during the Old English period, it is during early Middle English when these changes begin to surface in the texts more consistently and spread at a faster rate. In fact, as mentioned in the introduction, not even a fifth of Old English *jan*-pairs survive in Middle English texts.

The main source of data for our study is the *Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English* (*LAEME*) for two reasons: to date it is the most comprehensive corpus of the period we are concentrating on and it aims at a diplomatic edition of the texts, following the manuscript faithfully. The data of our study are two different sets of verbs, whose clausal behaviour we will compare. First, we have chosen three different labile verbs, namely *burnen, melten* and *(a)quenchen* (infinitive forms following the *Middle English Compendium*). These three verbs were selected because of their frequency of use in Early Middle English and the high number of tokens found in *LAEME* compared to other labile verbs. This is especially true in the case of *burnen*. Second, we have chosen two non-labile verbs, one intransitive-only verb, *risen*, and one transitive-only one, *(a)quellen*. The main criterion for selecting these two verbs was the number of tokens in our data source. Our objective was to include verbs whose number of tokens was as similar as possible to the number of examples of labile verbs used transitively and intransitively respectively, so that the results obtained from our analysis could be more easily compared.

We have analyzed 285 examples altogether, divided in the following way: 83 examples of labile verbs used intransitively and 55 examples of labile verbs used transitively. The sample of the intransitive-only verb *risen* consists of 92 items and the transitive-only verb *(a)quellen* has 55 examples.

As for the procedure used in our analysis of the data, we have included the whole clause in which each of the tokens is inserted. The relative position of the verb and all clausal arguments have been assessed and quantified. In the case of intransitive constructions,

we have compared the relative position of subject and verb in the examples of labile verbs functioning as an intransitive verb with that of *risen*. In the case of the transitive use of labile verbs, we have quantified the relative position of subject and object, on the one hand, and that of verb and object, on the other, in all clauses containing a transitive labile verb, and compared them with those of clauses containing *(a)quellen*.

When quantifying the results, we have taken into account two parameters which influence word order in early English.[3] The first one is type of subject: we note whether the different subjects in our sample are full noun phrases or pronouns (see for instance van Bergen 2003, Fischer *et al.* 2006). This is relevant for assessing word order since pronoun subjects tend to be less prone to inversion than full noun phrases (NP henceforth). The second parameter is type of clause. We have considered four types of clauses, i.e. main, coordinated, embedded and infinitival modal clauses, with an infinitive main verb and a finite modal verb.[4] The latter do not show any significant differences when used as main or embedded clauses, and build a distinct group. There are no constructions with analytic perfect in our sample. Passive clauses have been excluded for obvious reasons. The case of coordinated clauses poses a special difficulty. This type of clause presents a high number of examples in which the subject has been omitted. In the case of intransitive verbs, these examples have been excluded from our study, due to the impossibility of establishing the relative order of verb and subject. With respect to transitive clauses, however, these examples have been included when the relative position of verb and object was being assessed, since the omission of the subject need not affect the order of

[3] Discourse parameters have been left aside. They might be taken into consideration in a further study.

[4] The classification of the different types of clause included in our study is similar to the ones used in Fischer & van der Wurff (2006) and Pintzuk & Taylor (2006).

these elements. Examples (6) to (9) illustrate each of the clause types included; the relevant verbs are written in bold letters and the clause included in the sample has been underlined when part of a larger sequence.

(6) Main clauses

a) So **malt** ðat mete in hem to nogt (*LAEME* text 155)
So melted the meat in them to nothing
"So the meat in them melted to nothing"

b) Swilc niþ & hate **ros** hem on (*LAEME* text 155)
Such envy & hate rose them in
"Such envy and hate rose in them"

(7) Coordinated clauses

a) For men þor sinnen unkinde deden, so forsanc and **brente** þat steden (*LAEME* text 155)
Because men there deeds wrongful did, such as drowned and burnt the steeds
"Because men there made wrongful deeds, such as drowning and burning the steeds"

b) Ich awelde & monie ich **aquelde** (*LAEME* text 278)
I ruled & many I killed
"I ruled and I killed many"

(8) Embedded clauses

a) Alswa þet water **acwenched** þet fur, swa þa elmesse acwenched þa sunne (*LAEME* text 2000)
As the water put out the fire, so the alms put out the sin
"As water put out fire, so alms put out sin"

b) Þe king igadered his ferde and þencheþ alle **acwelle** cwic þat he findeþ (*LAEME* text 280)
The king gathered his army and thinks everyone kill alive that he finds
"The king gathered his army and thought to kill everyone alive that he found"

(9) Infinitival modal clauses

a) For ich schal **bernen** in fur & chiuerin in ise (*LAEME* text 242)
Because I will burn in fire & shiver in ice
"Because I will burn in fire and shiver in ice"

b) þir clerkis tell þat ar wise þate he of iuwis kinde sale **rise** (*LAEME* text 296)
These clerks tell who are wise that he of Jewish kind will rise
"These clerks, who are wise, say that he of Jewish kind will rise"

Finally, note that the parameters of subject and clause type only concern us insofar that they might affect the comparability of the data obtained from the two different sets of verbs analyzed.

5 Presentation of the data

The results obtained from the analysis of the data used in this study will be presented in different groups. First, the results concerning the overt expression of subjects will be discussed. Second, we present the results concerning the relative order of arguments in labile verbs and their transitive and intransitive-only counterparts.

The data analysis shows that the overt expression of subjects is not as relevant for our hypothesis as we considered in the first place; that is, our sample shows that labile and non-labile verbs do not differ considerably in this respect. The presence of the subject is overt in most examples of both *risen* and *(a)quellen* and the labile verbs used in this study used both transitively and intransitively. There are cases in which the subjects have actually been omitted; however, these examples correspond to cases in which no overt subject would be expected, namely coordinated clauses that share the same subject with the main clause, infinitival modal clauses and clauses containing a verb in the imperative form and are not seen in other clauses in our data. Therefore, the examples analyzed in this study point to the fact that the absence of the subject depends

entirely on the type of clause analyzed and has no connection to whether the verb is labile or not.

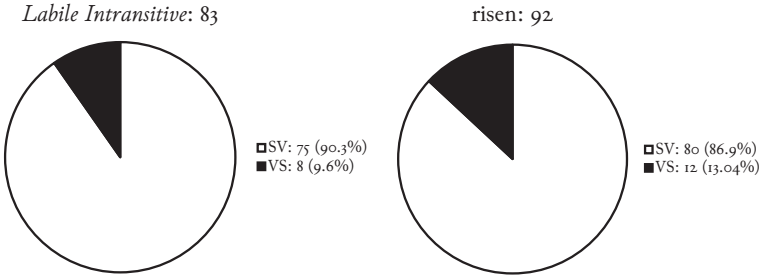
By reference to word order, we present first the data related to the relative position of subject and verb in labile verbs used intransitively and in *risen* (see Graphs 1, 2 and 3 below). The results of our analysis show that both labile verbs and the typical intransitive-only verb chosen for comparison present a very similar behaviour. Both display a much higher frequency of subject-verb order, 90.3% in the case of labile intransitive verbs versus 86.9% in the case of the intransitive-only *risen* (see Graph 1). Percentages between the two groups vary slightly, though. The percentage of SV in the case of *risen* is lower. As our hypothesis suggests, we expect labile verbs to show a more consistent word order, and hence to surpass *rise* with respect to the dominant SV order. However, this slightly larger amount of SV examples does not seem to be significant.

The fact that the number of examples of certain type of clauses varies substantially may have had an influence on the data. A relevant case is the number of embedded clauses in the SV sample (Graph 2): labile verbs appear in twice as many embedded clauses as *risen*. This could have skewed the results, since embedded clauses clearly favour SV. However, the much higher number of embedded infinitival clauses in *risen* (which present a very similar behaviour to embedded clauses concerning word order) compensates this imbalance. All in all, more examples are needed in order to determine whether word order in intransitive-only verbs is less consistent than in labile verbs functioning intransitively.

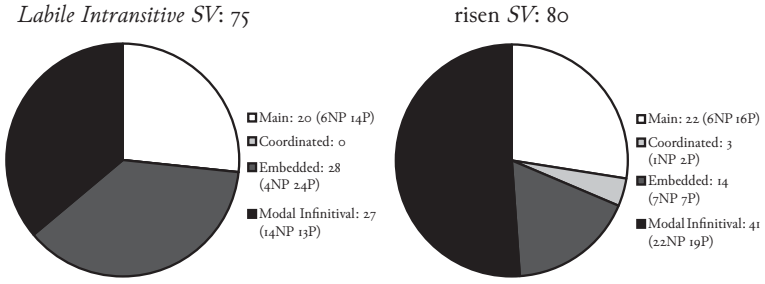
We have studied the possible influence of the V2 constraint on SV vs. VS word order in the sample and found out that, in fact, 16 out of the total of 20 VS examples (see Graph 3) have the verb in second position and could be argued then to respond to the V2 constraint. Our data are furthermore consistent with standard work on syntax with respect to the V2 rule and how it applies differently depending on the type of subject. Thus, P subjects tend to be more resistant to this constraint than their NP counterparts. In our

sample, most of the subjects that appear in clauses with inversion are NP (see Graph 3). Only one out of eight examples in the case of labile verbs has a P subject. The number of NP subjects in clauses with inversion is slightly higher in the case of *risen*, namely four out of twelve. In general terms, though, the predictions stated by Fischer *et al.* 2006, among others, apply in our sample.

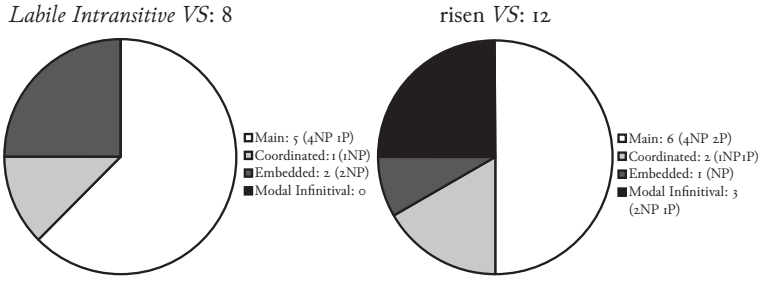
However, the workings of the V2 constraint have not proved relevant for our results, since there is no significant difference between labile and non-labile verbs in this respect. Therefore, the number of SV and VS examples in the graphs below corresponds to the number of clauses that show such a word order in their surface structure regardless of whether the V2 constraint is at work.



Graph 1: Total number of examples of labile verb functioning intransitively and risen*; and total number and percentage of SV and VS word orders*

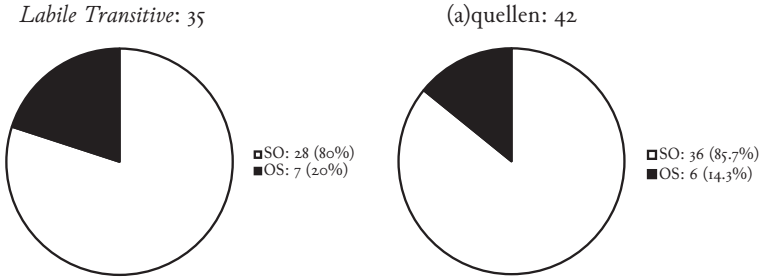


Graph 2: Total number of SV clauses in labile verbs functioning intransitively and risen*. In brackets the number of noun phrase and pronoun subjects*

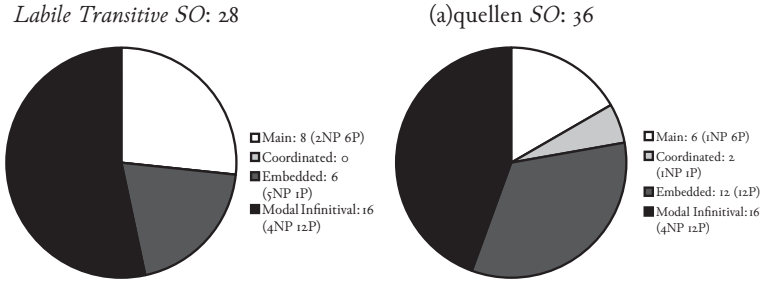


Graph 3: Total number of VS clauses in labile verbs functioning intransitively and risen. *In brackets the number of noun phrase and pronoun subjects*

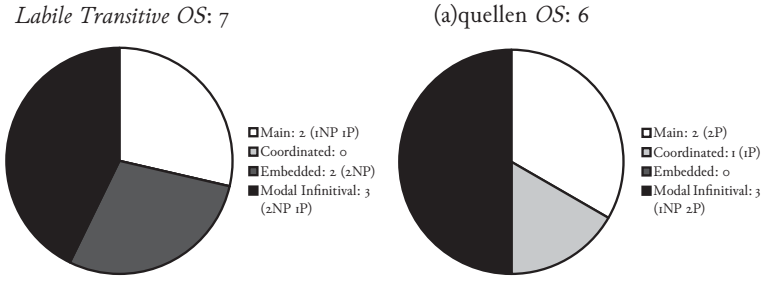
The next group of data we discuss is that of labile verbs functioning transitively in contrast to the data obtained from the transitive-only verb *(a)quellen*. The position of the subjects with respect to the objects in the different clauses is presented first. These data are displayed in Graphs 4, 5 and 6. The results show that the three transitive labile verbs and *(a)quellen* present a very similar tendency concerning the relative position of subjects with respect to objects with a difference of roughly 5% between labile transitive verbs and *(a)quellen* (Graph 4). The examples that show the expected subject-object order clearly outnumber those where the much rarer object-subject order is attested (only 7 out of 35 in the case of labile verbs and 6 out of 42 in the transitive-only one, see Graph 6). Contrary to what we hypothesized, though, object-subject order is more frequent in the case of the labile verbs in our sample. Nevertheless, the minimal difference of just one example is not statistically significant. This minimal difference cannot be attributed to an imbalance in the number of examples of certain type of clauses either. This is almost symmetrical both in the case of SO and OS orders, as illustrated in Graphs 5 and 6, with the exception of embedded clauses in the SO sample, in which the transitive-only verb shows 12 examples against 6 in the case of labile verbs. As commented above with respect to intransitive verbs, more examples need to be analyzed in order to reach definitive conclusions.



Graph 4: Total number and percentages of subject object and object subject order in labile verbs used transitively and (a)quellen



Graph 5: Total number of clauses with a subject-object order in labile verbs functioning transitively and (a)quellen. *In brackets the number of noun phrase and pronoun subjects*



Graph 6: Total number of clauses with an object-subject order in labile verbs functioning transitively and (a)quellen. *In brackets the number of noun phrase and pronoun subjects*

The last set of data that will be discussed in this paper concerns the relative order of verb and object in labile transitive verbs and

the transitive-only *(a)quellen*. These are the most significant data, since the relative position of verb and object is *the* defining parameter for clause constituent order, and one that is pivotal when describing word order changes cross-linguistically and within English in particular. It is also with respect to this parameter that variation between the two types of verbs being compared in this study is greatest, which makes the results all the more conclusive. There seems to be a consensus among scholars that Old English is mainly an OV language. According to Fischer & van der Wurff (2006: 186) and Fischer *et al.* (2006: 82), OV ceases to be productive in English around 1400, while VO only develops into a word order option in itself in late Old English. In our Early Middle English data, OV order examples clearly outnumber VO ones in the case of *(a)quellen*, which presents only 16 examples of VO clauses, compared to 39 OV ones. However, labile verbs present almost the same number of VO orders than OV ones, namely 30 versus 25.

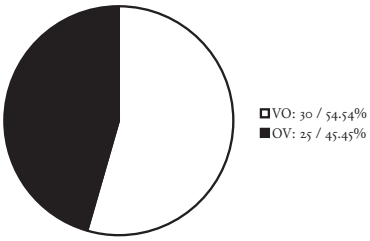
Again, it is important to have a closer look at the data in order to determine whether a disproportionate number of examples of a certain clause may have had some influence in our study. A close look at Graph 8 reveals that both the labile verbs and *(a)quellen* present exactly the same number of embedded clauses. This type of clauses tended to favour OV orders in Old English, a tendency that continues in the period under study in this paper, only becoming less common as the period advanced (Fischer *et al.* 2006: 81–82). Therefore, the cause for the higher number of VO examples in transitive labile verbs does not lie on the higher number of embedded clauses. The peculiar behaviour exhibited by labile verbs cannot be justified by the number of modal infinitival clauses either. There are 13 of these which show the VO order, while OV would be expected; on the other hand, its transitive-only sample only has 4 examples of this specific type of clause. Actually, *(a)quellen* does conform to the expected OV order in embedded and modal infinitival clauses, since clearly the majority

of these clauses (12 out of 16 and 18 out of 22, respectively) present a OV order, contrary to what is the case in the labile verbs in our sample. Additionally, concerning the OV examples (Graph 9), even if it is true that the number of embedded clauses is higher in *(a)quellen*, the number of modal infinitival clauses is quite similar. All in all, clauses containing *(a)quellen* show a higher number of examples with an OV order. This is especially true in the case of embedded and modal infinitival clauses, as expected. On the other hand, labile verbs show no clear preference for either VO or OV regardless of sentence type. In fact (see Graphs 8 and 9) the number of examples of each sentence type in both VO and OV orders is almost identical.

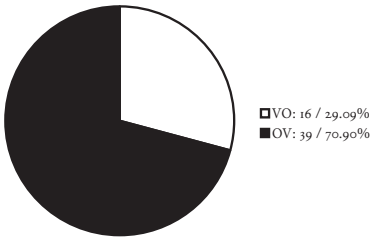
The fact that labile verbs show virtually no difference regarding VO / OV orders seems to contradict our hypothesis, since it predicts that labile verbs would exhibit a more consistent word order than a typical transitive verb. Nevertheless, the transitive labile verbs in our study display SVO order more often than a typical transitive-only verb at this stage of the language and this can be interpreted as the former's stronger thrust towards greater consistency, with labile verbs adopting what was going to become the canonical word order in late Middle English at an earlier stage than non-labile verbs.

The reason for the alleged preference of SVO among labile verbs might lie in the stronger disambiguating force of this word order when these verbs are concerned. Given that such verbs might be understood as both intransitive, with a patient subject, or transitive, with an agent subject and a patient object, a sequence like "[sin] the heart burns," if OV is a word order option, might be interpreted as (S)OV or SV, with *burn* as transitive and *heart* as its object, or an intransitive *burn* with subject *heart*. However, within a SVO order, *burn* can only be interpreted as a subject in the example. The order (S)OV is hence from the point of view of labile verbs more ambiguous than (S)VO.

Labile Transitive VO/OV: 55

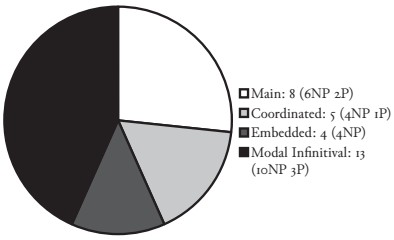


(a)quellen *VO/OV*: 55

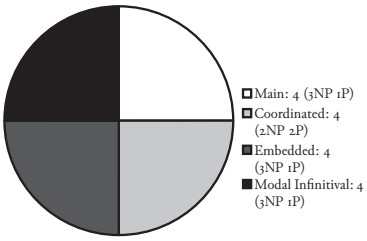


Graph 7: Total number and percentages of verb-object and object-verb order in labile verbs functioning transitively and (a)quellen

Labile Transitive VO: 30

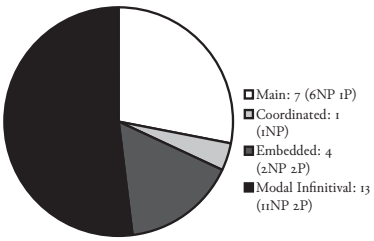


(a)quellen *VO*: 12

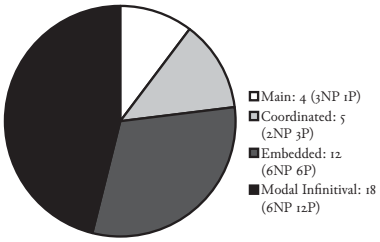


Graph 8: Total number of clauses with verb-object order in labile verbs functioning transitively and (a)quellen. *In brackets the number of noun phrase and pronoun objects*

Labile Transitive OV: 25



(a)quellen *OV*: 39



Graph 9: Total number of clauses with object-verb order in labile verbs functioning transitively and (a)quellen. *In brackets the number of noun phrase and pronoun objects*

6 Conclusions

In this paper it has been our intention to assess the possible influence of syncretism in the expression of valency on early Middle English syntax. We set out from an initial hypothesis put forth by García García (2012), which connects the frequency of labile constructions in English to two syntactic parameters which act as disambiguating strategies for verbal valency. These are the obligatory expression of the subject and a fixed word order.

In the study we have analyzed a significant sample of labile constructions in early Middle English texts using *LAEME* and compared the results with non-labile verbs. We have quantified the following features in each set of verbs: overt vs. covert subjects, SV vs. VS in intransitive and SO vs. OS and VO vs. OV in transitive verbs. The data have refuted part of our initial hypothesis.

On the one hand, with reference to the obligatory expression of all arguments in the clause, our data have shown that this criterion does not seem to be relevant. A higher number of omitted subjects has no connection with whether the verb in the analyzed clause is labile or not. The absence of subject is related to another factor, namely the type of clause. In fact, our data only show examples of omitted subjects in coordinated, modal infinitival clauses and those in which the main verb is in the imperative form, as expected in present-day English.

On the other hand, labile verbs used intransitively and typical intransitive-only verbs also present an almost identical behaviour in relation to the relative order of subject and verb. Even if the number of examples displaying a VS order is indeed slightly higher in the case of the intransitive-only verb, the difference does not seem to be significant. More examples need to be analyzed in order to check whether these two types of verbs consistently behave in the same way concerning the relative position of subject and verb.

Another part of our hypothesis is confirmed by our data. This is the one related to the position of object and verb, which is arguably the most significant since it is the defining word order

parameter at clause level. The results obtained from the labile verbs used transitively and those of the transitive-only *(a)quellen* vary considerably. The latter shows a clear preference for OV orders (70.9% of cases), while the labile verbs used in this study present a very different tendency, since slightly more than half of the examples (54.54% to be precise) display the VO order that would become the rule by the end of the Middle English period. Given that labile verbs increased remarkably in the Early Middle English period, they may have given impulse to the spread of the change from OV to VO order. Our data seem to support the idea that constructions with labile verbs anticipate the tendency to SVO order. Nevertheless, the results obtained from this study should be treated with caution, and more data need to be analyzed in order to reach definitive conclusions.

Luisa García García & Esaúl Ruiz Narbona
University of Seville

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