7. Against the Evolutionary Accounts of Old English Relative Clauses

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1. Introduction

It has been often assumed that relative clauses in Old English exemplify the rise of hypotaxis from parataxis in the history of English. The assumption starts from the observation that the status of clause linkage can fluctuate depending on the interpretation of a demonstrative as illustrated below.

(1) bi þam monnum is hwæthwugu to aræfenne þa ðurh unwisnesse synne fremmað
    in those men is something to be-tolerated they through ignorance sin commit
    'something is to be tolerated in those men they commit sin through ignorance'
    (Bede 1.27.72.7-8)

The sentence (1) is interpreted as an instance of parataxis, that is, juxtaposition of two independent clauses if the italicized demonstrative þa functions as a deictic/ anaphoric demonstrative pronoun. However, (1) can be also illustrative of hypotaxis with a split relative clause. In case þa performs the role of a relative marker, the sentence receives the interpretation of 'something is to be tolerated in those men who commit sin through ignorance'.

Notice that the kind of ambiguity observed in (1) vanishes in the following example (2), in which the relative clause is incorporated into the main clause and located immediately after the antecedent.

(2) eower fæder se on heofenum is wat hwæs eow þearf biþ
    your father who in heaven is knows what for-you necessary is
    'your father who is in heaven knows what is necessary for you'  (Blick 2:103)

Subordination and ensuing disambiguation in (2) are assumed to represent diachronic development from parataxis to hypotaxis (O'Neil (1976), Hopper and Traugott (2003), inter alia). It is further suggested that the change should be gradual and mediated by a transitory stage of left dislocation as shown below.

(3) Se geleafa, þe bið buton godum weorcum se, bið dead
    The belief that is without good works that is dead  (CHII 31:34-5)
In (3), the DP *se geleafa* modified by the *pe* relative clause is a left dislocate and binds the resumptive pronoun *se* in its base position. However, the left dislocated DP can be reinterpreted as a subject once the resumptive pronoun is removed as shown below.

(4) *Se geleafa þe bið buton godum weorcum bið dead*
   
   The belief that is without good works is dead

The sentence (4) becomes equivalent to (2) with regard to clausal status; each of them has the subject immediately postmodified by the embedded relative clause.

2. Relative Clauses in Old English

2.1. Types of relativizers and Case attraction

Relative clauses in Old English can be classified into three groups, depending on their relativier. The most frequent type is the one where the invariant particle *pe* introduces a relative clause as in (3) and (4). The 'the/that' type of demonstratives (*se, seo, þæt*) also constitute relativizers as seen in (1) and (2). Sometimes a demonstrative and the indeclinable particle *pe* combine to form a compound relativizer as exemplified below.

(5) *þet folc þa þe on ðam scipe wæron færcodon ða scipo to Ludene*
   
   ‘the people who that in the ships were turned-back the ships to London

   In (5), the italicized compound relativizer consists of the nominative plural demonstrative *þa* and the particle *þe*.

   Unlike the invariant *pe*, a demonstrative relativizer is declined by number, gender and Case. It agrees with the number and the gender of the antecedent, while its Case form is generally determined by the Case requirements of the relative clause. However, the relative clause does not always decide the Case of the demonstrative relativizer in Old English. The sentence below illustrates the so-called Case attraction, in which the Case of the demonstrative relativizer is 'attracted' by that of the antecedent.

(6) *Sy on earðan sib mannum þam ðe beoð godes willan*
   
   'be in earthly peace to-men(Dat) whom(Dat) that are of-god will

   '(May) be in earthly peace to men who are in god's will   

   (CHI 2:30-31)