Valency Patterns in Old English

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INTRODUCTION

This work was conducted applying the ValPaL methodology in order to investigate valency patterns and alternations of 79 Old English verbs. I discussed the syntax of Old English valency classes, namely zerovalent verbs, one-place, two-place, and three-place verbs. Then, I described and analysed Old English uncoded and coded alternations.

UNCODED	CODED
Body Part	Passive
Cognate/Kindred Object	Man-Alternation
Applicative	Causal vs Non-Causal (Labile verbs)
Object Omission	Reflexive & Reciprocal
Benefactive	Impersonal
	Gerundive/Infinitive Complement

CODED ALTERNATIONS: alternations that are overtly marked on the verb by an affix, a clitic or an auxiliary. Example: Passive.

Basic sentence frame: I ate an apple. ~ Passive alternation: All the apples were eaten.

UNCODED ALTERNATIONS: alternations in which a morphological marking on the verb is not present. Example: Understood Omitted Object

Basic sentence frame: I ate an apple. ~ Understood Omitted Object alternation: I have already eaten.

CORPUS & METHODOLOGY

ParCorOEv2 (109.985 tokens)

Boethius' De Consolatione Philosophiae	23.972 tokens
Herbarium	10.863 tokens
Lacnunga	8.901 tokens
Leechbook	11.883 tokens
Medicina de Quadrupedibus	4.337 tokens
Old English Martyrology	24.355 tokens
Old English Orosius	13.638 tokens
St. Mark's Gospel	12.036 tokens

The ValPaL project

- An online database gathering information about the valency patterns of verbs in different modern languages
- Based on the assumption that it is possible to achieve a semantic classification of verbs through the analysis of their syntactic behaviour (Levin 1993)
- Necessary adjustments to apply this methodology to ancient languages (Zanchi & Tarsi 2021):
  - ◊ Morphological criterion
  - ◊ Frequency criterion
  - ◊ Historical criterion

SOME RESULTS

- The degree of prototypicality of transitive verbs seems to affect their coding of arguments. A prototypical transitive event involves an *agent*, i.e., the participant volitionally initiating a state of affairs, and a *patient*, i.e., the entity undergoing the state of affairs. Less prototypical transitive verbs (e.g. experiential verbs) are less likely to show the NomAcc construction.

(1) […] *gif* ***ðe*** *licode* *his* *dysig*
If 2SG.DAT like.PST.3SG POSS.3SG.M.NOM.SG folly.NOM.SG
and *his* *unrihtwisnes […]*
and POSS.3SG.M.NOM.SG injustice.NOM.SG
"[…] if his folly and his injustice had pleased thee […]" (BOET.027.019.017.)

- Competing constructions: prepositionless case vs prepositional phrase (e.g. 'dative alternation')

(2) ond *ða* *sona* *brohte* ***him*** *se*
and then soon bring.PST.3SG 3SG.DAT.M DEM.NOM.SG.M
hræfn *gehalne* *hlaf*
raven.NOM.SG.M entire.ACC.SG.M loaf.ACC.SG.M
"And immediately the raven brought him a whole loaf." (MART.016.003.034.)

(3) *ðone* *wer* *oft* *englas* *sohtan*
DEM.ACC.SG.M man.ACC.SG.M often angel.NOM.PL visit.PST.PL.
ond ***him*** ***to*** *brohtan* *heofonlico* *gereordo.*
and 3SG.DAT.M to bring.PST.PL heavenly.ACC.PL food.ACC.PL
"This man was often visited by angels, and they brought him heavenly food" (MART.048.002.009.)

- Possible non-passive ('middle') interpretations of syntactic passives.

(4) *[…]* *ðæt* *hi* *nyton* *hwær* *ða*
that 3PL.NOM not_know.PRS.PL where DET.NOM.PL
soðan *gesælða* ***sint*** ***gehydde*** *[…]*
true.NOM.PL. felicity.NOM.PL be.PRS.PL hide.PTCP.PST.
"[...] that they know not where the true felicities are hid [...]." (BOET.032.041.024.)

- Labile verbs already present and substituting the (already obscure) Germanic *–*ja* causativisation, even though less frequent than PD-English.

(5) *Ða* *n-olde* ***hi*** *ðæt* *fyr*
since NEG-want.PST.3SG 3PL.ACC DET.NOM.SG.N fire.NOM.SG.N
bærnan […]
burn.INF
"As the fire would not burn them […]." (MART.077.004.006.)

(6) *Ða* *ongan* *se* *tun* *bernan* *on*
Then start.PST.3SG DET.NOM.SG.M town.NOM.SG.M burn.INF in
ðære *niht […]*
DET.DAT.SG.F night.DAT.SG.F
"On this night the town began to burn […]." (MART.101.004.005.)

THE FUTURE

- Enlarging the Old English corpus
- Analysing with the same methodology the next stage of the language, i.e. Middle English
- Refining the database of Present-Day English

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