The Syntax of Old English Poetry:
The Position of Heads in Noun Phrases and Prepositional Phrases
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It is frequently claimed or assumed that the syntax of Old English poetry is different from the syntax of the prose; see Andrew 1940, Blockley 2001, Fakundiny 1970a, 1970b, Fulk 1992, van Kemenade 1987, Mitchell 1985, among many others. In this paper I examine the syntax of nominal and prepositional phrases and conclude that it is the same in poetry as it is in prose, except where the demands of meter interfere with 'normal' word order. In particular, I look at the position of elements such as determiners, possessive pronouns, and prepositions, all of which can be analyzed as heads taking nominal complements. In Old English poetry, these elements can appear either before their complements (the usual position), as shown in (1a) and (2a), or after their complements, as shown in (1b) and (2b):

(1) a. gif <u>þin willa</u> sie   wuldres aldor   (Andreas 70)
         if your will be   of-glory king
         '... if it be your will, king of glory, ...'

      b. swylce ic <u>maguþegnas</u>   <u>mine</u> hate (Beowulf 293)
         likewise I thanes   my order
         'Likewise, I order my thanes ...'

(2) a. þæt hie ne murndan   <u>æfter mandreame</u>   (Andreas 37)
         that they not longed   for revelry
         'so that they did not desire revelry ...'

      b. metod for þy mane   <u>mancynne fram</u>   (Beowulf 110)
         Lord for that crime   mankind from.
         '(but he —) the Lord (— banished him far) from mankind because of that crime.'

I will demonstrate that the variation in head-complement order illustrated above is of two types. For determiners and possessive pronouns, orders like that shown in (1b) are due to the meter: in almost all cases, reversing the word order would result in an unmetrical half-line, where the pattern of stresses is not one of Sievers' five types. In Old English prose, noun phrases with determiners and possessive pronouns after their complements are almost non-existent. In contrast, the position of the preposition in (2b) is not due simply to meter: in more than 40% of the cases of this type, reversing the order of preposition and complement would result in a metrical half-line. And the word order of (2b) can be found in the prose texts, although at a low frequency.

These data lead to an interesting prediction: word order variation that is independent of meter will be found in the prose, although perhaps at a low frequency. This approach may shed some light on the grammaticality of low-frequency word orders in Old English prose: if they exist in the poetry and are independent of meter, they can be assumed to represent a grammatical option in the prose.

References

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