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SOME NOTES ON OLD ENGLISH SYNTAX AND STYLE*

Kazumi Manabe

I

It is rather difficult to decide which of the restrictions are syntactic and which are stylistic (mainly through the genre of the texts in question). Yet a satisfactory statement is dependent upon distinguishing these two clearly, and this is one of the cruxes in studying the syntax and style of Old English prose.

Anglo-Saxon laws, for instance, cover different activities. In spite of their diversity, however, the great majority of legal sentences have an underlying formulaic structure which says something like 'if X, and (then) Z shall do Y.' The following are from the collection of King Alfred:

Gif he mægas næbbe oððe þone mete næbbe, fede cyninges gerefa hine. Gif hine mon togenedan scyle, and he elles nylle, gif hine mon gebinde, polige his wæpna and his ierfes.--Gif he ut oðfleo ær þam fierste, and hine mon gefo, sie he feowertig nihta on carcerne, swa he ær sceolde. Gif he losige, sie he afliemed, and sie amænsumod of eallum Cristes ciricum. 28.72-6¹⁾

Eac we settað æghwælcere cirican, ðe biscep gehalgode, ðis frið: Gif hie fahmon geierne oððe gearne, þæt hine seofan nihtum nan mon ut ne teo. Gif hit þonne hwa do, ðonne sie he scyldig cyninges mundbyrde and þære cirican friðes. 28.89-92

In terms of sentence structure, 'if X' is most likely to be accommodated by means of adverbial clauses and is followed by the plain main statement. As is obvious from these examples cited at random, Anglo-Saxon legal sentences consist almost without exception of the main statement with few subordinates (apart from 'if X' clauses repeated monotonously). This makes the majority of the sentence structure simple and 'if X, and (then) Z shall do Y' dominant in Anglo-Saxon legal sentences.

Closely connected with laws are Anglo-Saxon wills and they are of crucial importance for a study of Old English prose, since they are perhaps the closest to the actual spoken English

*"some Notes" here are based mainly on my findings in *Syntax and Style in Early English—Finite and Non-finite Clauses c.900-1600*(Tokyo: Kaibunsha, 1979).

1) Numbers refer to page and line in *Medieval English*, ed. R. Kaiser (Berlin: 1961).

of the time. They may have something in common with a 'legal' document in the modern sense, but, following the Germanic custom, a man preparing for death spoke his oral will in the presence of witnesses. The following is the will of Badanoð (837).

7 ðonne ofer hiora dei, wifes 7 cilda, ic bebeode on godes noman ðæt mon agefe ðæt lond inn higum to heora beode him to brucanne on ece ærfe, swæ him liofast sie. 7 ic biddo higon for godes lufe ðæt se monn se higon londes unnen to brucanne ða ilcan wisan leste on swæsendum to minre tide, 7 ða godcundan lean minre saule mid gerece swe hit mine ærfenuman ær onstellen.

ðonne is min willa ðæt ðissa gewriota sien twa gelice: oðer habben higon mid boecum, oðer mine ærfeweardas heora dei.

449.11-450.19²⁾

The frequency of expressions such as *Ond ic biddo higgon*, or *Ðonne is min will* introduced by "and" or "then" is undoubtedly due to the fact that it is an oral will. Besides, the redundant use of the pronoun in *ofer hior dei, wifes and cilda* may be one of the syntactic devices used so as to leave no misunderstandings on the part of the hearers. Wills, therefore, are of particular importance as colloquial documentation, but these stylistic characteristics should be carefully taken into consideration.

Indeed, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* may be an important prose text as it is one of the few original English prose texts of the time, but we cannot possibly regard it as representative of the English prose of the period. We should take account of the stylistic features of chronicles, whose original function was to "characterize the receding series of years" in order that "the years might not be confused in the retrospect of those who had lived and acted in them."³⁾ This is to some extent true of early English chronicles. According to my previous analysis of clauses in *The Parker Manuscript of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (the genealogical preface and the years 1 to 891), sixty-two entries consist of a single clause, and are almost without exception introduced by *Her*.⁴⁾

Her Cenwalh wæs gefulwad: 646⁵⁾

2) *The Oldest English Texts*, ed. H. Sweet, EETS os 83.

3) J. Earle and C. Plummer, eds., *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, Vol. II (1899; rpt., Oxford, 1952), p.xix.

4) As for the narrative mode, see C. Clark, "The narrative mode of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* before the Conquest," *England before the Conquest*, ed. by P. Clemoes and K. Hughes (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1971), 215-35

5) Numbers refer to the date of the entry in *The Parker Manuscript of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, ed. C. Plummer on the basis of an edition by J. Earle, Vol. I (Londen: O. U. P., 1892).

Her wæs þæt micle fugla wæl: 671
 Her forþferde Guþlac se halga: 714
 Her Ine 7 Ceolred fuhton æt Woddes beorge: 715
 Her Oswald se æþeling forþferde: 730
 Her Aepelbald 7 Cuþræd fuhton wiþ Walas: 743
 Her mon slog Selred cyning: 746
 Her Cuþred feaht wiþ Walas: 753
 Her Cuþbryht arce bisc forþferde: 758
 Her Aepelbryht Cantwara cyning forþferde: 760
 Her wæs se mycla winter: 761
 Her Iaenbryht ærcebisc onfeng pallium: 764
 Her Milred bisc forþferde: 772
 Her Wulfred ærcebisc pallium onfeng: 804
 Her wearþ Ceolwulf his rices besciered: 821

Furthermore, sequence clauses in multi-clause entries are in the majority of cases introduced by *and* (abbreviated, 7). A couple of examples will be suffice.

Her Edwine wæs ofslægen, 7 Paulinus huerf eft to Cantwarum, 7 gesæt þæt biscepetl on
 Hrofesceastre: 633
 Her Penda forwearþ, 7 Mierce wurdon Cristne. 655

Among the Alfredian prose corpus, by far the smallest number of finite and non-finite clauses appear in *Parker*. Moreover they appear only in two categories. Their limited use occurred because of the stylistic features of chronicles. My Alfredian corpus comprises three extracts, each of which contains about 1000 lines of prose.⁶⁾

It is true that a feature of Old English syntax is the heavy use of correlative clauses, and that writers of the period accept the limitations of the language and find co-ordination rather than subordination suitable as a sentence structure. Yet it is not proper, as is often done,⁷⁾ to take examples from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, since most of these features are due to the 'genre conditioning' factor of early English chronicles.

Thus even from limited instances, it is obvious that we cannot make a hasty conclusion

6) As to finite and non-finite clauses examined here, see K. Manabe, *Syntax and Style in Early English--Finite and Non-finite Clauses* c. 900-1600 (Tokyo: Kaibunsha, 1979), pp. 2-4. See also *Ibid.*, p.17 and p. 9.

7) See, for instance, N. F. Blake, *The English Language in Medieval Literature* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), p. 145.

about any Old English syntax without sufficient consideration for features characteristic of each genre.

| | Finite | | | Inf | | | Ved | | | Ving | | | VNING | | |
|---------------|--------|-----|--------|------|----|--------|------|----|--------|------|----|--------|-------|----|--------|
| | Bede | CP | Parker | Bede | CP | Parker | Bede | CP | Parker | Bede | CP | Parker | Bede | CP | Parker |
| As subject | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| -it | 14 | 35 | | | 5 | | | | | | | | | 2 | |
| +it | 8 | 12 | | | 2 | | | | | | | | | | |
| As complement | 2 | 18 | | 4 | 36 | | | | | | | | | | |
| As object | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| -S | 99 | 119 | 14 | 20 | 17 | 5 | | | | | | | | | |
| +S | | | | 22 | 5 | 2 | 4 | 2 | | 1 | | | | | |
| As adjunct | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| -P | 199 | 351 | 32 | 1 | | | 4 | | | 12 | 12 | | | | |
| +P | 18 | 56 | 7 | 16 | 3 | 1 | | | | | | | | | |
| Adj mod | | | | 1 | 9 | | | | | | | | | | |
| Total | 340 | 591 | 53 | 64 | 77 | 8 | 8 | 2 | | 13 | 12 | | | 2 | |

II

'Source conditioning' is certainly another important factor which is worth due consideration. For instance, Table 1 above shows a high proportion of both present and past participles (including absolute participles) in *Bede*, which is due to the influence of the Latin source. Most examples clearly correspond to the same idioms in the Latin original.

Fulfremede compe heora sawle to gefean sendon þære upplican ceastre heofona rices wuldres. 42.1-2⁸⁾

*Latin: . . . animas ad supernae civitatis gaudia *perfecto agone* miserunt. I,44.17-8⁹⁾
 . . . þy læs *him forðferendum* se steall saw neowre cirican ænige hwile buton heorde taltrigan ongunne. 106.18-9

8) *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. T. Miller, EETS os 95, 96.

9) Numbers refer to the volume, page and line in Bede, *Historical Works*, with an English translation by J. E. King, 2 vols. (Loeb Classical Library) (1930; rpt. London: Heinemann, 1971).

*Latin: . . . ne se defuncto status ecclesiae tam rudis, vel ad horam pastore destitutus, vacillare inciperet. I, 218.5-7

Ac for intingan hersumnesse ic *haten* gefafode, . . . 260.7

*Latin: . . . sed obedientiae causa *iussus* subire hoc, . . . II, 12.21-2

. . . swa he lyft onstyrge ond his hond swa swa us to sleanne *beotiende* æteaweð, . . . 270.4-5

*Latin: . . . ut quoties aere commoto. manum quasi ad ferendum *minitans* exerit, . . . II, 26.5-6

Incidentally, apart from those parts which are left out, condensed or summarized, Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* is translated literally, to the sacrifice of English idiom now and again (there are of course a half-dozen passages in Alfred's *Bede* which should receive honorable consideration in any history of English prose, such as the account of the landing of Augustine and his preachings, the story of the conversion of Edwin of Northumbria by Paulinus, etc.). It is, however, generally accepted that Alfred himself works on the whole by paraphrase, concerning himself with the practical work of creating understandable English from the Latin. Thus the over-literal renderings are less reminiscent of Alfred, and the English version is assumed to be executed by a Mercian.¹⁰⁾ Though Alfred's role in this work may have been minor, it cannot be denied that he had some hand in a version of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.¹¹⁾

However, it is worth noting here that we should take account of 'source conditioning,' such as the high proportion of both participial constructions in *Bede*, undoubtedly influenced by the corresponding constructions in the Latin original. This factor should be emphasized all the more because 'source conditioning' of this kind is, though to a lesser extent, observable also in Alfred's important translation, *Pastoral Care* (abbreviated as *CP*) which is a relatively free translation from the original, 'hwilum word be worde, hwilum angit of andgiete'(7.19-20)-- 'sometimes word for word, sometimes according to the sense.' Each section of Alfred's may be said to be a paraphrase rather than a translation of the corresponding piece of Latin: literal translation is found when he can do so, taking the Latin over without any substantial change in diction or syntax, or when he translates Scripture.¹²⁾ Nonetheless, some participles are due to Latin models.

10) D. Whitelock, "The Prose of Alfred's Reign," in *Continuations and Beginnings*, ed. E. G. Stanley (London and Edinburgh: Nelson, 1966), p. 70.

11) D. Whitelock, *The Old English Bede* in *The Proceedings of the British Academy* 48, p. 77.

12) W. H. Brown, "Method and Style in the Old English *Pastoral Care*," *JEGP*, LXVIII (1969), 666-684.

. . . hie sua healicra ðinga *wilnigende* ne forðio his niehstan untrume & scyldige, . . . *CP*,
99.4-5¹³⁾

*Latin: . . . ne aut alta *petens* proximorum infirma despiciat, . . . 32.32-3¹⁴⁾

It cannot be denied however that *CP* contains some instances which are not attributable to Latin models or are rendered from the Latin 'gerundium'.

. . . *geðafiende* he hit forbireð for ðam dome his geðylde. 27.21

*Latin: . . . quia quos permittendo tolerat, profecto per iudicium reprobationis ignorat.
15.1-2

Forðæm se ðe hine selfne maranð godes behæt, & ðonne forlæt ða maran god, & went hine
to ðæm læssum, ðonne bið hit swutol ðæt he bið *fromlociende* oferswiðed. 403.3-4

*Latin: . . . Qui igitur fortiori studio intenderat, retro convincitur respicere, si relictis
amplioribus bonis ad minima retorquetur. 104.22-5

So far as the syntax is concerned, we should be careful not to overestimate the influence of the Latin sources. Yet it is clear that 'source conditioning' is not to be lightly disregarded in studying the syntax and style of Old English prose, since original literary compositions were limited in Old English prose and many prose works were translated or adapted from Latin.¹⁵⁾

III

The nature of the audience cannot be said to have been sufficiently considered in revealing the syntactic and stylistic traits of Old English prose. N. F. Blake claims that the audience of medieval literature was disparate and dispersed.¹⁶⁾ He doubts modern scholarship which assumes that poets in particular were writing for a restricted and homogeneous audience.¹⁷⁾ Whether Blake's claim applies to Old English prose in general is, I believe, still open to question, and there may be further points to be considered in terms of the audience. Besides, things can often be different with each individual prose work or writer.

13) *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*, ed. H. Sweet, EETS os 45, 50. Hatton MS.

14) S. Gregorii Papae I, *Opera Omnia in Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, ed. J. P. Migne (Parisiis, 1896).

15) As for the placement of past participle in Aelfric's *ppl* + auxiliary verb construction, see H. Minkoff, "Some Stylistic Consequences of Aelfric's Theory of Translation," *Studies in Philology*, LXXIII (1976), 29-41.

16) Blake, *Ibid.*, p. 19.

17) *Ibid.*

It is for instance evident that Gregory's *Cura Pastoralis* was designed to instruct clergymen in performing their duties, and that Alfred translated it into English with a view to the spiritual education of the clergy. Thus *CP* contains a strikingly high proportion of predicative infinitives with the equative verb denoting necessity or obligation (see Table 1).

On oðre wisan *sint to manianne* ða ðe eall orsorglice begitað ðisse worulde, . . . 387.5-6
 Ðy *sint to manienne* ða ðe on ðisse worulde orsorglice libbað, . . . 389.27-8

Naturally Alfred's preface to *CP* takes the form of a letter addressed to each bishop¹⁸⁾ who already had a colloquial command of English. Thus, there is no evidence that the audience of *CP* was less homogeneous than that of Aelfric and Wulfstan, though Alfred intended to have his translation sent to every see in the kingdom,¹⁹⁾ and he wrote in the end for 'eall sio gioguð ðe nu is on Angelcynne friora monna'(7.10) . . . 'all the free born youth of England', but those youth, according to Alfred himself, 'ða speda hæbben ðæt hie ðæm befeolan mægen, sien to liornunga oðfæste, ða hwile ðe hie to nanre oðerre note ne mægen, oð ðone first ðe hie wel cunnen Englisc gewrit arædan: lære mon siððan furður on Lædengeðiode ða ðe mon fur or læran wille & to hieran hade don wille'(7.11-5) . . . 'have sufficient means to devote themselves to it, be set to learn as long as they are not fit for any other occupation, until that they are well able to read English writing: and let those be afterwards taught more in the Latin language who are to continue learning and be promoted to a higher rank.' It should be recalled in this connection that the judgement of the laymen prevailed over the prejudices of the Roman ecclesiastic in Aelfric's age,²⁰⁾ and that Aelfric is afraid in the Genesis preface that *the unlearned* will not understand the difference between the Old and New Laws.²¹⁾ Furthermore, according to White, *Aelf. L. S.* was written especially for the laity.²²⁾ Therefore, it might be possible to propose that Alfred had somewhat less unlearned audience in *CP* in mind than Aelfric and Wulfstan.

I should pause here to point out the result of my previous analysis of the clauses which reveals that the Aelfric-Wulfstan corpus is an exceptional one, in which we observe a significant reduction in the proportion of non-finite to finite clauses.²³⁾ The analysis focused on selection from the following seven corpora. Except for two corpora, three prose texts and two verse texts are taken from each corpus, and each extract contains about 1500 lines of

18) Whitelock, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

19) *Ibid.*

20) C. L. White, *Aelfric: A New Study of his Life and Writings* (1898; rpt., Hamden, 1974), p. 57.

21) A. E. Nichols, "Aelfric's Prefaces: Rhetoric and Genre," *English Studies*, XLIX (1968), p. 221.

22) White, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

23) See Manabe, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

verse.²⁴⁾

- (1) Alfredian corpus
- (2) Aelfric-Wulfstan corpus
- (3) Early Middle English corpus
- (4) Fourteenth century corpus
- (5) Chaucer corpus
- (6) Fifteenth century corpus
- (7) Sixteenth century corpus

It is clear from the analysis of the seven corpora that, with the exception of the Aelfric-Wulfstan corpus, we see a steady rise in the proportion of non-finite clauses until in the sixteenth century there are more non-finite than finite clauses. However, worth noting is that the low proportion of non-finite clauses does not necessarily mean the high frequency of finite clauses.²⁵⁾ Aelfric is first of all concerned to provide for an unlearned audience knowledge for the salvation of their souls and through his vernacular sermons Aelfric sought to make things easier even for preachers in such a way as to be intelligible to them: the periodic sentences or interlocking clauses were beyond an unlearned audience of Aelfric and Wulfstan's time.²⁶⁾ In the *object* category, for instance, fewer finite clauses appear in *Aelf. L. S.* (of the three texts comprising the Aelfric-Wulfstan corpus, *Aelf. L. S.* has the lowest frequency of finite clauses as objects). This is attributable to Aelfric's usual practice of telling the story in the narrative pattern. One narrative device here is the use of direct, rather than reported speech.

He þa se casere dreorigan mode. cwæð to his þegnum mid ðyllicum wordum. Mycel is me unbliss minra dyrlinga miss. þæt hi us swa færlice mid ealle syn æt-lumpene. swa mære cynnes menn swa swa hi wæron. for-þi hi on-sæton and mid ealle ondredon. þæt we heom forðon grame beon woldon. forðon þe hi ær us hyran noldon; Ða cwæð se casere to ðam embstandendum; Nese la man wat. and ic eac þæt sylfe wat. geseo we ænigne mann þe georne hine sylfne to urum godum bugan wylle. eall þæt he ær agylte læsse oppe mare. we lætað hit of gemynde swilce hit næfre ne gewurde. Aefter swilcum wordum and mænigfealdum oðrum. Stopon þa in to ðam casere ða yldestan þe on his hirede wæron. and þa halgan to him wregdon and be heom þus spræcon. Ealra manna hlaford geond þas widan

24) *Ibid.*, p. 2.

25) Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

26) As for the simplification of the periodical suspense of the original, see J. Pope, "Aelfric and the Old English version of the Ely privilege," *England before the Conquest*, ed. by Clemoes and Hughes, 98-9.

worulde. we biddað þinne cyne-scipe . . . I, 504.269-82²⁷⁾

Concerning the low frequency of the clauses, we will also have to take into account of the graphic arts of Aelfric and Wulfstan's time which are simple and symmetrical in design, often partly or wholly in outline. According to J. Hurt, Aelfric's prose has something in common with these drawings in its highly patterned clarity and simplicity.²⁸⁾ In addition to this, the low frequency of the clauses in question in *Aelf. L. S.* may be due to two rhetorical devices as well: classification and enumeration. There follows a list of saints without any attempt to tell their lives, although each receives a brief comment.

Her efne on-ginð þæra eadigra seofon slæpera ðrowung. ðara haligra naman scinað on heofenum. lihtað eac on eorðan beorhte mid cristenum mannum. Ðara is se forma his geferefa heretoga Maximianus. ðær-to se ofer malchus. se gefensuma. and se ðridda þær-to martiniaus. þonne se feorða dionisius. se halga iohannes fifta. þonne ðæs sixtan seraphion nama is æt nextan. ðæs seofþan constantinus. Ðara seofen haligra freolstid bið on geare fif nihton ær hlafmæssan. I, 488.1-8

Some stylistic features of chronicles can often be observed in *Aelf. L. S.*, where saints' lives are outlined briefly in chronological order, each episode being introduced by *þa* and *and*.

Ða he ða þreo burga gefaren hæfde. ða het gelangian him to swiðe hraðe ealle ða burhwara togædere. Cwæð þæt he gemot wið hi habban wolde. Sona swa hi þæt ge-axodon ðaþe on god be-lyfdon. ða wurdon hi ealle ðearle afyrhte. and heora gesomnunga ealle wurdon sona to-sceacerode sic. and þa halgan sacerdas. and ealle ða godan færlice ge-yrnde hreowlice wurdon. He þa decius se casere þa he for into efese mid ðrymme and mid prasse. he ða his heortan ahof swa upp ofer his mæðe swilce he god wære. Ongan ða timbrian deofolgyld on cirican. and bead . . . I,488.19-28

These features may also be attributable to Aelfric's attempt to make his prose easier for an unlearned audience to understand, choosing the sentence structure with few subordinates.

The proportion of non-finite to finite clauses is the lowest in Wulfstan's *Homilies* of all the texts examined in my previous study from Old English to early Modern English.²⁹⁾ His sermons are designed for public delivery with a most careful adjustment to an unlearned

27) Numbers refer to the volume, page and line in *Aelfric's Lives of Saints*, ed. W. W. Skeat, EETS os 76, 82.

28) See J. Hurt, *Aelfric* (New York: Twayne, 1972), p. 135.

29) Manabe, *op. cit.*, p. 31. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 49, p. 77, p. 99, p. 124 and p. 148.

audience and are attempts to achieve clarity. Wulfstan's predilection for finite clauses might stem from his need for clarity achieved by the use of finite clauses with specifications of tense, mood, aspect, voice, and subject. It is to be noted however that the low proportion of non-finite clauses in Wulfstan's prose is partly due to his thorough Anglicization, which leads to the rare use of participles unfamiliar to an unlearned audience.

Even from what is tentatively mentioned in this section, 'audience conditioning' may be said to be an essential factor in examining syntactic and stylistic features of Old English prose.

The three conditioning factors referred to in this paper would require much more detailed investigations, taking other factor (s) into consideration.