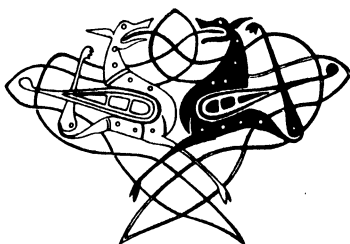


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PREPOSITIONS IN OLD AND MIDDLE ENGLISH

A Study of Prepositional Syntax and the Semantics of *At*,
In and *On* in some Old and Middle English Texts

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PREFACE

The present study is concerned with aspects of the syntax and semantics of prepositions in Old and Middle English. It falls into three main parts. (i) Chapter 1 provides a brief survey of a few selected 20th century studies on the origins and development of prepositions as an independent word-class, and thus forms the background for the analysis presented in the following chapters. (ii) The subject of chapters 2 and 3 is prepositions in Old English; chapter 2 deals with prepositional syntax, including a discussion of Old English word order since that has a bearing on and (as I attempt to show) is in part affected by the position of prepositions and prepositional phrases, while chapter 3 is a semantic analysis of the three prepositions *æt* / *at*, *in* and *on* in two different sections of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. (iii) In a similar way, chapters 4 and 5 deal with prepositions in Middle English; chapter 4 carries the examination of the syntax of prepositions and clausal word order into Middle English, whereas chapter 5 contains analyses of *at*, *in* and *on* in three Middle English texts: *Ancrene Wisse*, *Vices and Virtues* and Chaucer's *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*. A section at the end of the chapter looks at grammaticalization as a more general process. The time-span covers the period c. 900-1400, from the time of 'classical' OE up to the time of Chaucer, i.e. before the transitional period in the 15th century when Middle English began to turn into what we now call Early Modern English.

The present study is based on a Ph.D.-thesis submitted to Odense University, Denmark. There are several people to whom I wish to express my gratitude. During the work on my thesis, I received helpful comments and much practical assistance from Niels Davidsen-Nielsen, Erik W. Hansen and Hans Frede Nielsen. Erik W. Hansen's detailed criticism, in particular, forced me to reconsider many of the details as well as some of the general topics in my original version; and Hans Frede Nielsen, as managing editor of *NOWELE*, has both shown patience and offered useful advice in connection with this publication. I am also obliged to Terence Moore

Preface

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Special thanks are due to the Carlsberg Foundation for their generous support, which enabled me to carry out the research for this book under very favourable conditions, and for their contribution towards the printing costs. I also gratefully acknowledge the additional financial support which I received from the Danish Research Academy.

Finally, I wish to thank my wife, Jean, for her encouragement at all stages of this book. My work in the last few years has caused quite an upheaval for the whole family, and I can only hope that both she and our two children, Miranda and Patrick, will feel that they too have benefitted from it.

June 1992

TLN

CHAPTER 1

Origins and Development of Prepositions A Brief Survey of Selected Studies

1.1 Introduction

As a background for the later analysis of prepositions in Old and Middle English, it is my aim in this first chapter to provide a brief survey of some of the most relevant theories that deal with the origins of prepositions as a word-class. Furthermore, since this problem is bound up with the question of word order - both at phrase and clause level - in Indo-European (IE) and even in the earlier stage of Proto-Indo-European (PIE), that issue will also be touched upon. Obviously, this short presentation makes no claim to completeness and the works of many other scholars in the field could, and perhaps ought to, have been included in the following discussion. The writers who do appear in the survey have been chosen for four reasons. First, I wanted to confine myself to 20th century studies. Secondly, the writers chosen here, besides representing a cross-section of the people working in this field, have all made influential contributions to the subject. Thirdly, as well as including a few older treatments to demonstrate the continuity of thought in this area, I wanted to concentrate on more recent studies, from the 1970s and 1980s, as representatives of some of the latest theories. Lastly, I have striven to select studies which arrive at different, sometimes opposite, results and which are carried out within different theoretical frameworks. I thereby hope to offer as balanced an assessment as possible of at least some of the arguments in the continuing debate.

1.2 Bruckmann

For some time there seems to have been a consensus among historical linguists about the origins of at least the majority of simple

1. Origins and Development of Prepositions

prepositions,¹ in that they are said to have developed from syntactically independent adverbs or particles in PIE. An early 20th century example of this is Bruckmann (1911:762), who notes that many words which previously had adverbial function at some point acquired prepositional function and surmises that this change must have taken place during what he calls the Indo-Germanic period. He sees that as an example of a general and continuing move towards the formation of ever tighter syntactic units. (For detailed exemplification of early prepositional constructions see, for instance, Delbrück 1893:ch. XV.)

1.3 *Meillet*

Meillet (1934:193) claims that adverbial elements of this type were first independent to such a degree that the relationship between them and either nouns or verbs was one of 'apposition', and he explains this in terms of a general principle in IE, viz. the autonomy of the word: 'l'autonomie du mot est le principe qui commande la structure de la phrase indo-européenne' (1934:359). Later, but at an early stage of the development of IE, some of these independent adverbial elements began to form closer links with nouns and verbs and became syntactically attached to them as prepositions and preverbs, respectively.² As regards their form, Meillet finds that - like adverbs - prepositions and preverbs resemble fixed forms of previous nouns, though he is forced to admit that many of them do not have the form of any known declination.

1.4 *Lehmann*

Lehmann's work on the early stages of IE and on PIE is conducted within a typological framework. He maintains that particles first supplemented case-forms as postpositions, then (due to word order shift of the main clause constituents) as prepositions, before they became 'the sole marker of relationships between verbs and nouns' in many IE dialects (1974:197). Since Lehmann posits stable underlying

1.4. Lehmann

case categories, he sees this three-stage shift as merely a surface structure phenomenon. Lehmann offers various explanations both for (a) the shift from a synthetic system dominated by inflectional case marking to a more analytic one that relies heavily on the use of post-/prepositions and for (b) the specific change in word order from postpositions to prepositions.

Concerning (a), it is true that the number of morphologically marked cases has been reduced in the Germanic and the Romance languages compared with Pre-Germanic and Latin, respectively, and that many of the semantic functions formerly expressed by cases have been taken over by prepositional constructions.³ However, Lehmann is concerned with an earlier, pre-historic stage of the development, where we are on much shakier ground due to the absence of (surviving) written material. Furthermore, ancient Greek, classical Latin and the oldest recorded stages of the Germanic languages still had rich case systems, as well as prepositions, so the breakdown of the case systems was certainly a slow one, and we know from the Germanic family, for example, that even related languages change on an individual basis in this respect. Indeed, in some instances they hardly change at all. The most obvious Germanic example of this is modern German, which has preserved more of the early Germanic grammatical characteristics than the other modern members, such as having four morphological cases (and three genders in the singular) in nouns, adjectives, pronouns and articles alike. For this reason alone, it is wise not to make too sweeping generalizations about IE, where in the nature of things corroborating evidence is non-existent.

More interesting, but based on very flimsy evidence, is Lehmann's explanation of how it happened that general adverbs or particles became established as postpositions, as he claims they did. Following Delbrück (1893), he points out that particles in IE combined with verbs as well as with nouns. However, he argues that when particles followed the noun but preceded the verb, there could be structural ambiguity about which of the two elements (N or V) the particle belonged to (cf. example (34) in Lehmann 1974:197). This possible indeterminacy between the two types of constituency structure is illustrated by (1) and (2) below - where P stands for the original 'particle':

1. Origins and Development of Prepositions

- (1) N [P V] (preverb)
- (2) [N P] V (postposition)

Hence, it is claimed that what was previously one type of construction (1) was perhaps at some point reinterpreted as another (2), for - like Bruckmann and Meillet - Lehmann too believes that prior to this development there was no clear distinction between particles, preverbs and postpositions. In his view, it was therefore only when they entered into a closer (phrasal) construction with a noun or a verb that they developed specific uses.

As for (b), Lehmann's explanation of the word order change from postpositions to prepositions is based on an alleged general change in sentential word order in IE. According to this view, early IE had SOV as its 'basic' word order, but this was later changed to SVO, which in turn forced a change from N+P to P+N. The justification for the latter claim rests on the observation that, across a large sample of the world's languages, postpositions usually co-occur with SOV and prepositions with SVO order.⁴

But here, too, we ought to tread carefully. First of all, there is no conclusive evidence that IE did have SOV order at any stage (cf. the arguments presented in the following sections) and consequently no certainty of a later word order change, as claimed in (b). Secondly, fixed postpositions (as opposed to positional variation of particles) may never have been clearly established in IE syntax, as claimed in (a), in which case we cannot talk about an actual change of position to prepositions, at the most about a gradual standardization of P+N word order in most IE languages. (The fact that three IE daughter languages - Hittite, Sanskrit and Tocharian (cf. 1.5) - had postpositions proves nothing either way; this may simply be due to N+P, rather than P+N, becoming standardized as the norm in those languages.) Thirdly, even if we do allow for the possibility that IE at one stage had both SOV order and fixed postpositions, we would not be justified in assuming that a change in the one would necessarily lead to a change in the other, given that the very notion of 'implicational tendencies' clearly allows for exceptions to this general trend (cf. note 4).

1.5. Friedrich

In recent years, typologists have often used correlations within and between different types of languages, typically in the form of co-occurrence sets (for which see 1.6), as arguments for such syntactic questions as the likeliest word order and the existence of either prepositions or postpositions in reconstructed languages. This is not an unreasonable procedure - in fact, it may well be the best one open to us for this kind of investigation - but we must be aware of the inherent uncertainty of this approach and not pretend that implicational tendencies are exceptionless rules.⁵

1.5 *Friedrich*

Lehmann's arguments for an early SOV stage in IE are dismissed by Friedrich (1975:38), who points out that Homeric Greek (HG) and classical Sanskrit cannot be said to show clear postpositional structure and hence do not support Lehmann's claim that IE had SOV order. He also notes that postpositions are the norm in only three IE languages - Hittite, Sanskrit and Tocharian - but that prepositions nevertheless occur in the last two. Central to Friedrich's argument are the so-called 'locative auxiliaries' (preverbs/prepositions) in HG, whose function (we are told) it is to disambiguate the aspect of the verb and clarify the spatio-temporal meanings of verbs and case endings. Since they can both precede and follow their head in HG, and seem to function as prepositions in nearly all IE stocks, including Old Armenian and Old Iranian, Friedrich surmises that this may also have been the case in IE.

So while Lehmann, like Delbrück before him, argues for SOV order in IE with a subsequent change to SVO, Friedrich - in view of the indeterminacy of the evidence - opts for a basic SVO order and consequently sees no need to postulate that a major word order change ever took place in IE. Moreover, if postpositions were never clearly established syntactically, it makes little sense to argue for a syntactic change which turned them into prepositions, let alone search for explanations for it.

1. Origins and Development of Prepositions

1.6 *Hawkins*

In a detailed study of what he sees as universals in word order phenomena, based on 'a language sample of some 350 languages' (1983:9), Hawkins too addresses the controversial question about the likeliest type of word order in PIE (1983:265-74). From our point of view, his presentation is interesting not only for the conclusions that he arrives at, but also for the role that prepositions play in his discussion.

Crucial to his arguments is his use of various co-occurrence sets for both individual languages and types of languages. For example, some of the implicational universals that Hawkins operates with involve noun modifiers (i.e. demonstratives, numerals, adjectives and genitives), and when such universals have prepositions as their 'ultimate antecedent', it is possible (in Hawkins's view) to conflate them into a single implication, called the 'Prepositional Noun Modifier Hierarchy' (PrNMH), on the basis of which, by using 5 noun modifier parameters in combination with prepositions, he extracts 7 permissible strings of co-occurrences (1983:75). These strings are then further reduced to 4 subtypes, which still have prepositions but now make use of only 3 parameters, viz. different relative orders of adjective/noun, genitive/noun and relative clause/noun. I reproduce the 4 subtypes in (3) below (cf. 1983:266):

(3)	Subtype 1	(Prep)	NAdj	&	NGen	&	NRel
	Subtype 2	(Prep)	AdjN		NGen		NRel
	Subtype 3	(Prep)	AdjN		GenN		NRel
	Subtype 4	(Prep)	AdjN		GenN		RelN

The relevance of these noun modifier co-occurrences is that they appear in all the earliest IE daughter languages. However, not all of these have prepositions. As we saw in 1.5, Hittite, Sanskrit and Tocharian are postpositional, but in spite of that they have the same noun modifier co-occurrences as the other IE languages rather than one of the types usually associated with postpositional languages, such as the two in (4), which are not found in any of the early IE daughters:

1.6. Hawkins

- (4) a. (Postp) NAdj & GenN & RelN
 b. (Postp) NAdj & GenN & NRel

Against this background, Hawkins finds it very difficult to imagine that PIE could have had postpositions, since this would mean that

prepositions were innovated not only in the majority of IE daughters, but in numerous co-occurrences for which all other languages of the world demonstrate an overwhelming preference for, or strong tolerance of, postpositions rather than prepositions.

(1983:271)

If, on the other hand, we assume that PIE had prepositions, such typological anomalies do not arise.

Having thus demonstrated, on the basis of co-occurrence harmony, the likelihood of the existence of prepositions in PIE, Hawkins uses this as an argument in his discussion of basic word order in PIE. He acknowledges that there are two fundamentally opposed views on the subject; on the one hand, those who like Lehmann - and, we might add, Givón (1979:275-309) - opt for SOV; and on the other hand, Friedrich, who favours SVO or at least finds it as likely a possibility. Faced with this alternative, Hawkins unhesitatingly sides with Friedrich (1983:274) and argues for SVO order in PIE. The main reason for this is precisely the evidence from prepositional co-occurrence sets in the early IE languages, which was summarized above, combined with the fact that the co-occurrence of prepositions and SOV order is rare in languages (cf. 1983:166 - TABLE 14).

Hawkins's argument for prepositions in PIE appears to carry quite a lot of weight in that it is difficult to reconcile the evidence of the noun modifier co-occurrences in early IE with the existence of postpositions in PIE. But that does not mean that the case has been proved. That Hawkins is aware of this is clear from his comment that 'these results must be seen alongside the other reconstruction criteria' (1983:274), which are set out in six points (1983:262). We should of course not lose sight of the fact that, as pointed out earlier,

1. Origins and Development of Prepositions

implicational universals are tendencies or statistical constructs, not inviolate laws of language. For example, although SOV and prepositions rarely co-occur, it does actually happen in more than a few languages, and that is one of the most convincing typological cases.

I do not deny that typological data - if treated with a certain amount of caution - can be useful, especially in areas where we have no better explanations, but the explanatory power of typological theories is far from obvious. There is, for instance, no way of stating how many exceptions to a statistical tendency can be allowed before the statement becomes vacuous. Furthermore, typological data are in many cases the results of rather arbitrary either-or decisions. Variations and existing alternative patterns are excluded in a simple sequence of clause constituents such as SVO or SOV, so that for instance important distinctions in word order between closely related languages are obscured; indeed, the implication is that they are of no consequence.⁶ So when Hawkins is at pains to establish whether PIE had prepositions or postpositions, this dichotomy does not allow for the possibility that it may well be a wrong way of approaching the problem. If some of the assumptions we looked at in previous sections concerning the origins of prepositions are correct, it is certainly possible to imagine that the early stage of PIE contained independent items, which later became part of noun phrases as prepositions or postpositions (as the case may be) or of verbs as prefixes; i.e. one particular pattern may emerge from the standardization of two or more existing ones. In 1.4, we looked at one suggestion as to how such attachments may arise and in the following section we shall look at how the next step in the process could be envisaged.

1.7 *Hock*

Hock (1986:376-78) adopts a position somewhere between Lehmann and Friedrich. He too thinks that the distinction in early IE between adverbs, preverbs and prepositions was 'not yet complete', and he points out that they could occur in both prenominal and postnominal position in the clause. Hock finds traces of this fluctuating stage in Sanskrit, Greek and very early Latin, but says that most of them

1.7. Hock

were later eradicated because of a tendency to 'generalize one order or the other'. Thus Sanskrit and a few other IE languages (see above) developed postpositions, whereas the rest (including Greek, Latin and the Germanic languages) got prepositions. In other words, one type of word order did not necessarily precede the other.

Although he admits that it is by no means clear why most IE languages acquired prepositions, Hock suggests two complementary reasons for this. First, he postulates a polarization by which post-nominal position was assigned to preverbs, and prenominal position to adpositions (Hock's term). This state of affairs is illustrated in (5) and (6) below (cf. 1986:377) - where O = object and P = particle:⁷

- (5) Preverb: O [P V]
(6) Adposition: [P O] V

Secondly, we are told that adpositions gradually became NP-bound clitics, in which role they could be either proclitic (i.e. precede the NP) or enclitic (i.e. follow the NP). In constructions with a simple NP, they would usually be proclitic, but Hock makes the interesting, if weakly supported, suggestion that in complex NPs they may originally have been enclitic on the first word of the NP; for instance, on the adjective *magna* in (7), taken from early Latin:⁸

- (7) *magna cum gloria*
 Adj < P N

Note, however, that in (7) the adposition precedes the noun, even if we accept (which we need not do) that it is enclitic on the adjective, and because of this prenominal position Hock suggests that a reinterpretation may have taken place, with the result that prenominal position came to represent the 'unmarked' word order.

In contrast to Friedrich and Hawkins, Hock (1986:330ff.) can endorse Lehmann's view that at an early stage of IE the basic word order changed from being SOV with V+AUX order to being SVO with AUX+V order. He argues that the AUX+V order presumably resulted from a two-stage change, which was brought about first by the process known as 'AUX-cliticization'⁹ and secondly by the implementa-

1. Origins and Development of Prepositions

tion of 'Behaghel's First Law'.¹⁰ On the other hand, he strongly disagrees with Lehmann on the question of how this change affected, or was affected by, the establishment of prepositions. According to Hock, the evidence from IE word order seems to suggest that 'the correlation between major constituency order and the ordering of other elements is weak at best,' and it appears to have been 'entirely irrelevant' in the development of IE 'adverbials' into pre-/postpositions (1986:378). Therefore, on this view, even if we assume SOV to have been the basic word order at one stage, it does not follow that fixed postpositions must have existed at the same time.

Hock thus combines Friedrich's belief in positionally variable pre-/postpositions in IE with Lehmann's and Givón's assumption of basic SOV word order. His explanation of a two-stage change to SVO order is in some ways attractive, even if it is not completely original, but it still suffers from the same inherent defects as most other kinds of typological explanations, including the implicational tendencies we considered above, namely uncertainty: the postulated change is not obligatory and therefore need not be 'implemented'. For if it was obligatory, modern German and Dutch syntax would be a mystery among the Germanic languages on two counts: partly because the 'AUX-cliticization' has 'applied' only in main clauses, not in subordinate clauses (where the usual word order is still S-O-V-AUX), and partly because the second stage ('Behaghel's Law') has not taken place in main clauses either. Modern English, on the other hand, differs in important respects from other Germanic languages such as modern Danish and German in the ordering of the main constituents in main clauses, even though they are all classified as having SVO order. For example, in the two latter languages (but not in English), inversion of subject and finite verb is compulsory when another constituent occupies first position in the clause and examples of OVS are extremely common when the subject or the object is a personal pronoun, but these (and other) distinctions are obscured in the typological emphasis on universals. Given differences of this kind - even among a very small group of related languages - and bearing in mind the other points of criticism raised in 1.6, it is difficult not to be somewhat sceptical about arguments based on such typological notions as generalized constituency order and not to feel that these

1.8. Concluding remarks

notions are of rather limited value, when they are applied to individual languages or to comparisons among a particular group of languages.

The typological position (e.g. as represented by Hock) may therefore, perhaps, be expressed in the following way. If a word order change takes place from SOV to(wards) SVO, it is likely to go through the stages outlined by Hock. But it need not take place. Even assuming that the early stages of the various Germanic languages provided the necessary conditions for a change to SVO order, they were clearly not sufficient conditions (if one accepts these terms as valid at all). Thus modern English, at one end of the scale, has acquired what I shall refer to as 'strict' SVO order in both main and subordinate clauses (cf. 2.5.1), whereas Dutch and German, at the other extreme, are furthest away from the alleged 'end result', with the Scandinavian languages taking up an 'intermediary' position. Yet, despite these differences in word order, the Germanic languages have all unambiguously developed prepositions.¹¹ A strong version of the typological hypothesis would therefore claim that, sooner or later, the other Germanic languages will develop the same word order as English, but surely we cannot make this prediction with any confidence. On the other hand, if we cannot, it seriously weakens whatever explanatory power typological theories (in their strong form) may have and, some would say (e.g. Lass 1980 and Matthews 1982), reduces them to (near) vacuity.

1.8 *Concluding remarks*

As already mentioned, the brief survey of studies on the origins of prepositions presented above is far from complete, although I believe that it represents some of the important types of argument that are found in 20th century research in this field. But even this rather sketchy evidence shows that there is not general agreement on what was the 'basic word order' in PIE. Nor can we be certain that early IE underwent a stage of having well-established postpositions, which only later became prepositions in most languages, as e.g. Lehmann claims. The evidence that exists is equally consistent with the possi-

1. Origins and Development of Prepositions

bility that prepositions were present from the earliest stage (cf. Hawkins) or that a period of positional variation was followed by increasing syntactic restrictions, which led to a generalization of either a prepositional or a postpositional pattern in the individual languages (cf. the position adopted by Friedrich and Hock).¹² Another uncertain factor concerns the question whether (and if so, to what extent) a change - or a standardization - was influenced by any shift in the order of the main constituents in the clause. For although such a correlation is possible, it cannot be taken for granted.¹³ In my view, the likeliest scenario in this case is that positionally non-fixed adverbs or particles entered into phrasal constructions with noun phrases, in prenominal position as prepositions (and in a few IE languages in postnominal position as postpositions), while others became part of verbal constructions, in preverbal position as preverbs (some of which developed into (in)separable verbal prefixes). In this way, a distinction arose early on between these two classes in syntactic as well as in functional terms.

Finally, before turning my attention to prepositions in Old and Middle English, I should like to comment briefly on two points in the above survey, as they will be of some importance for my discussion in the following chapters.

The first one relates to the AUX-element, so central to the argument presented in Hock (1986) and elsewhere. Before accepting the potential role that auxiliaries may have played in word order changes, we should at least be certain what we are talking about. Above all, we should not automatically assume that the notion and function of auxiliaries in early IE languages and later stages were similar to what they are in modern languages (where they can actually differ quite a lot from language to language). For example, Anderson (1991:14) contrasts Brinton's (1988:107) claim that 'there is ample evidence to reconstruct for common Germanic a category AUX' with Lightfoot's (1979:ch. 3) assertion that, in Anderson's paraphrase, 'innovation of the Modal category was also associated with the introduction of an AUX constituent' and maintains that, as far as Old English is concerned, 'the massive evidence for a central syntactic role for an element AUX, or a subcategory auxiliary ... is quite absent'. For this reason alone, we should be wary about the alleged