English as an analytic or synthetic language

Old English is frequently presented as a synthetic language, a language in which grammatical function of clause elements is primarily derived from inflections rather than from word order and prepositions, while Present Day English is said to be the opposite, and analytic language,

A.C. Baugh writes that “Modern English in an analytic, Old English a synthetic language.” Similarly, Dan McIntyre writes that “The main difference between Old English and Present Day English is that OE is a synthetic (or inflectional) language whereas PDE is an analytic (or isolating) language.”

Statements such as these are frequently demonstrated using examples in Present Day English. In McIntyre's case the example used is the sentence “Oswyn shot Sigbert”, which in turn is contrasted with “Sigbert shot Oswyn”, showing how a fixed word order is necessary to mark grammatical function. In a synthetic language (which Old English supposedly is), “we would not need to put the words in a particular order.” It would be easy here for a reader with no prior knowledge of Old English text to assume that the word order in said language is more irrelevant, or random, but is this truly the case?

To a certain extent it is. Old English has an extensive system of inflections concerning most word classes, and often it is perfectly possible to rely on these, rather than word order and prepositions, to denote grammatical function. For example, the very first line of Voyages of Óhthere and Wulfstan reads:

“Óhthere sæde his hlāforde”

Literally “Óhthere said his lord”. However, the possessive and the noun here are in the dative case, which tells us that “his lord” in this case is the indirect object, and a more meaningful translation would have to be “Óhthere said to his lord”. Similarly, in a phrase such as “se cyning stiló þone stān” (“the king steals the stone”), we can tell who is doing the stealing and what is being stolen by the inflections; the subject, “se cyning” is in the nominative case, while the direct object, “þone stān” is in the accusative.
On page 57 of A History of the English Language, Baugh presents a paradigm of such noun inflections, and goes on to state that “Even these few paradigms illustrate clearly the marked synthetic character of English in its earliest stage.” It might be argued here that Baugh is jumping to conclusions. A paradigm of noun inflexions for any given language does not by itself say anything about the language other than the fact that it contains noun inflexions. Again we are led to assume that a set word order is essentially unnecessary Old English. However, by using Baugh’s own paradigm we can clearly demonstrate how inflections are not sufficient to establish the grammatical function of clause elements within a sentence. Consider the sentence:

“Þā cyningas ofslogen þā hengestas.”

Literally: “The kings killed the horses.” Both are nouns in the masculine declension, as exemplified by Baugh by the word “stān”. Now, if Old English is a synthetic language in which grammatical function is derived from inflections rather than word order, how does one interpret this sentence; who killed who? It is of course impossible, as both the endings and the determiners are completely identical. This is not just the case for nouns in the strong masculine declension either. Just by using Baugh’s paradigm we can tell that quite a lot of the inflectional endings are identical, such as the genitive, dative and accusative singular forms of “giēfu” and “hunta”. These are referred to as ambiguous, whereas the forms which only occur once are considered uniquely defining. In cases such as the one with the kings and the horses, with the ambiguous inflectional endings, one would have to rely on either word or contextual information to arrive at any sort of conclusive interpretation.

Studying the use of adjectives in Old English texts is also a useful way to determine to what degree the language can be said to be synthetic. For example, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for the year 755, variously uses the dative and the instrumental case to describe the king's small force:

“feahṭ mid lytlum werode” (“fought with a small force”)

“Ond þā geascode hē þone cyning lytle werode” (“And then he learned of the king being with a small force”)

4 Baugh&Cable p. 57
In this case the preposition “*mid*” combined with the dative case “*lytlum werode*” performs the same role as the instrumental case “*lytle werode*”; they would both likely be translated “*with a small force*”.\(^5\) The use of the instrumental case here argues for the idea of Old English as a synthetic language, as the inflection denotes grammatical function. However, the fact that the preposition + dative is also used would imply that certain analytic features has found its way into the language. In addition, the dative case inflection is in this case essentially superfluous, as it adds no new information not already conveyed by the preposition.

Similar examples can be found in other Old English texts. In *Voyages of Ōhthere and Wulfstan*, we find the sentence “*for ðæm hy foð þa wildan hranas mid*” (line 33-34) (“*for them they caught wild reindeer with*”). Again a dative and a preposition is used, rather than an instrumental. At the time these Old English texts were being written, the instrumental was disappearing\(^6\), which can be said to be an example on how the language was becoming less synthetic.

According to Baugh, Present Day English is an analytic language, a language in which grammatical function is derived from word order and prepositions. Taking this statement at face value would mean that word order would have to be fixed, and this is what is shown by the aforementioned textbook examples. Present Day English is typically an SVX language. However, consider the paragraph:

> “He received two pieces of fruit; a kumquat and a pomegranate. The kumquat he threw away, but the pomegranate he ate immediately.”

While not necessarily a common mode of expression, this way of *fronting* the direct object is useful for placing emphasis on what is contextually important in the sentence, what is in focus, and would hardly be considered “wrong”. Going back to Baugh, the example given when demonstrating the synthetic nature of Latin\(^7\) shows a complete disregard for this aspect of the sentence. The fact that two or more forms are grammatically acceptable does not necessarily mean they are identical with regards to inferred meaning.

The use of fronted elements shows that the word order in Present Day English is slightly less fixed than

\(^5\) Although note that the meaning is not entirely identical. In the first sentence the force is an instrument for the king to use, and in the second it accompanies him. However, both meanings may be expressed both in the instrumental case and with the preposition + dative construction. Baker p. 40

\(^6\) Baker p. 39

\(^7\) “Nero interfecit Agrippam”, “Agrippam interfecit Nero”, oddly no “Nero Agrippam interfecit”. Baugh & Cable p. 56
certain textbook phrases would have us believe. A better typological description of Present Day English would be (X)SV(X).

In conclusion, it might be said that simply stating that Old English is a synthetic language and Present Day English is an oversimplification. While Old English is certainly more synthetic than Present Day English, it would be easy, especially for a monolingual student, to assume that these two languages (or varieties of a language) are somehow diametrically opposed. Robert McColl Millar presents a scale rather than an absolutist statement:\(^8\)

**Synthetic** < Finnish – Russian – Latin – German – Dutch – French – English – Tok Pisin > **Analytic**

Placing Old English somewhere between Latin and German. He also describes word order in a highly synthetic language as *flexible* rather than *free*. Old English is not purely synthetic, and neither does it have a free word order; it has a flexible or variable word order. Similarly, Present Day English is not purely analytical, as there are still inflections in use, and the word order is to some extent flexible.

**Bibliography:**


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\(^8\) Millar p. 44