# CONCEPTUAL SEMANTICS AND GRAMMATICAL RELATIONS IN OLD ENGLISH

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## 1. Introduction

Not every historical linguist embraces the idea of Chomsky's syntactocentrism with enthusiasm. It may be untimely to say unkind things about it, but there are syntactic problems which cannot be resolved satisfactorily only by formal operations. Under the current psycholinguistic views there seem to be some chances of recognizing the old conceptual world of the speaker and thus contributing to a more appropriate understanding of the writings he has left.

Following chiefly Jackendoff's ideas expressed in *The architecture of the language faculty* (1997) – yet with due respect for other linguistic and psycholinguistic orientations – I will discuss grammatical relations which involve word order, thematic roles and word-formation (compounding) and which by structural standards prove so intractable. A common trait of them all is that they are structurally ambiguous and consequently differ in meanning, or that they are simply semantically opaque.

## 2. Word order

An example of how weakly significant word order in Old English can be is the first part of the following sentence:

1)      *Storm oft holm gebringeþ, geofen in grimmum sælum* (*Maxims* I 112/50)

which has been understood as either

'The sea often brings a storm, the ocean in stormy seasons' (Gordon 1954: 342)

'The sea often brings a storm' (Bosworth, entry *gebringan*)

or

'The storm often brings forth a flood' (Reszkiewicz 1971: 35)
'storm oft brings ocean into a furious condition' (Bosworth, entry *sæl*)

The interpretative difficulty lies in the fact that the functions of a grammatical subject and a grammatical object are not clearly transparent: the nouns *storm* and *holm* are both singular and each can agree with the finite form of the verb, *gebringeþ*, which as a two (or even three) argument verb requires a subject and an object. This brings up a question: which is which? Structurally speaking each can perform either function. They are both masculine, singular, of *a*-inflection of which nominative/accusative syncretism is a norm. Besides, there is no adjectival or pronominal modifier to help, neither can alliteration be helpful. Reszkiewicz searched for a clue to the functional identification in the position of the noun with regard to the verb and came to the conclusion that: "Older Old English, especially poetry, lacked both the definite and the indefinite articles; the object often preceded the governing verb" (Reszkiewicz 1971: 35). Although the grounds on which such a decision is reached are formally defensible, empirically they are less so as they can be falsified by a sentence, also a gnomic verse, which reads:

(2)     *Mægen mon sceal mid mete fedan* (*Maxims* I 118/44)

in which it is the subject *man* and not *mægen* which is closer to the finite form of the verb, *sceal* (*mægen* and *man* also show inflectional syncretism in this respect); this sententious saying means:

'One shall nourish strength with meat' (food) (Gordon 1954: 344)
'A man must feed strength with meat' (Bosworth, entry *fedan*)

The proponents of either of the two meanings of the gnomic "storm" verse would probably try to persuade us that their views are compatible with the formal grammatical relations. But which of the meanings would satisfy the pragmatics of the discourse? Although the senses of particular lexical items are clear, a real cognitive image is still concealed. As a historical linguist I am more comfortable asking questions than answering them, so my glimpse into the Old English cognitive mind will be based on the possible, we now try to see, life as it would have been over a millenium of years ago.

Since the conceptual structure of our example is not immediately predictable from the syntactic structure, nor is it found in the lexical structures, I will try to consider the language context first and then to search for similar uses of *storm* and *holm*. The sobering observation is that the remaining part of this gnomic

verse refers to stormy seasons over the ocean, the dun waves hastening fiercely to the land, etc. Here is a complete context:

(3)     Styran sceal mon strongum mode.
        Storm oft holm gebringeþ, geofen in grimmum sælum;
        onginnað grome fundian fealwe on feorran to londe, hwæþer he fæste stonde.
        Weallas him wiþre healdað, him biþ wind gemæne.
        Swa biþ sæ smilte, þonne hy wind ne weceþ; swa beoþ
        þeoda geþwære, þonne hy geþingad habbað,
        gesittað him on gesundum þingum, ond þonne mid gesiþum
        healdaþ cene men gecynde rice. (*Maxims* I 112/50-58)

'A man shall rule with a strong mind. The sea often brings a storm, the ocean in stormy seasons; fiercely they begin to hasten, the dun waves afar off, to the land; yet may it stand fast. The walls shall oppose resistance to them; they both feel the wind. As the sea is serene when the wind wakes it not, so peoples are peaceful when they have settled a dispute; they sit in happy circumstances and then hold with comrades' (Gordon 1954: 342).

The picture presented in the poem is hardy associable with flood. The latter occurs rather with the idea of water and rain.

In the *Genesis* (6.17) God says to Noah:

(4)     *ic gebringe flodes wæteru ofer eorðan*
        'I do bring a flood of waters upon the earth'

and later (7.4)

(5)     *ic soðlice sende ren*
        'I will cause it to rain'

Although I have no statistics – and do not even know if such exist – it seems that the lexical item *storm* is in a majority of cases conceptually connected with the sea, ocean, waters and not flood. Roughly the same image of tempest is evoked by the line from *Beowulf* 1131:

(6)     *Holm storme weol,*
        *Won wið winde, winter yþe beleac isgebinde*
        'The ocean surged with storm, rose up against the wind;
        winter bound the waves with fetters of ice' (Gordon 1954: 27)

In addition to short rather stereotyped references to a storm and the sea, Old English poetry offers two so-called "storm" *Riddles* (Kennedy 1943: 140 ff.) which in "over a hundred lines (give) the most realistic and spirited nature description to be found anywhere in Old English verse". Of these two, the longer and more dramatically expressed refers to a storm at sea (the other to the storm on land). This vivid description of thunderstorms has been suggested to be rooted in tradition of medieval thought on meteorology (cf. Kennedy 1943: 141 where Bede's *De Natura Rerum* is mentioned, and similar accounts in the *De Natura Rerum* of Isidore of Seville, reaching back to Lucretius and the Elder Pliny). If the same rules of reasoning are observed the semantic interpretation of our gnomic verse would find support in the sea as the origin of storm. The explanation is but a shortcut since by classical belief it is the force of the wind that is set forth as the cause of various kinds of storm. This violent force of the wind was supposed to be working under earth, over, within and under sea, as well as among clouds (cf. the *Riddle)*. The understanding of the rise of storm within classical tradition is nicely balanced with Christian spirit which is particularly evident in Ælfric's *De Temporibus Anni* (xi *De pluuia*) where a passage from the First Book of the Kings of the *Bible* I. 18.41-45 is quoted similarly in alliterative verse in the *Lives of Saints* 18.142-52:

(7)    He astah ða ardlice up to anre dune.
and gebigedum cneowum bæd ðone ælmihtigan god
þæt he renas forgeafe eorð-bugiendum.
and het his cnapan ða hwile hawian to ðære sæ.
gif ænig mist arise of ðam mycclum brymme.
þa gecyrde se cnapa seofon siðum him to.
and on ðam seofoðan cyrre sæde ðam witegan.
þæt an gehwæde wolcn of ðære widgillan sæ
efne þa upp astige mid þære unscæðþigan lyfte.
Efne ða aras se wind. and ða wolcnu sweartodon.
and com ormæte scur of ðære lyfte.

'Then he (Elijah), went up quickly to a mountain, and on bended knees besought the Almighty God, That He would give rains to the inhabitants of the earth; and bade his servant meanwhile look toward the sea, if any mist were rising out of the great ocean. Then the servant returned to him seven times, and on the seventh return said to the prophet, that, 'behold there ariseth one little cloud out of the wide-reaching sea, in the stainless sky.' Lo! then the wind arose, and the clouds grew dark, and there came a very great shower from the sky.'

The classical tradition of describing the causes of natural phenomena blended with religious elements are in agreement with superficial observations and a naive knowledge of nature, so typical of folk wisdom. The sententious saying that the sea often brings forth a storm is in my opinion just one of such nature maxims, an unsophisticated image of a widely accepted truth, like

(8)    *Forst sceal freosan, fyr wudu meltan* (*Maxims* I 116/1)
'frost shall freeze, fire melt wood' (Bosworth, entry *freosan*)
'Frost shall freeze, fire consume wood' (Gordon 1954: 343)

The arguments presented so far are not linguistic; they are meant to provide a basis for the assessment of the perception and cognition of the Old English speaker, though they look much like an old discussion of philological (European) tradition. However close the similarity can be the difference is obvious: we search for extra-linguistic knowledge in order to understand the sense of the structure which fails to correspond in an unambiguous way to a conceptual structure. Since the meaning in such cases is not directly predictable from syntax and lexical contents, other criteria have to be applied.

To conclude, the word order in Old English is not always structurally significant and therefore grammatical relations are not always overtly indicated by it. Another problem also related with grammatical relations stems from thematic roles ascribed not transparently to linguistic structures.

## 3. Thematic roles

Thematic roles, called theta roles (θ-roles), have been duly recognized in syntactically oriented grammars. They are supposed to be syntactically based but in fact they serve as a kind of interface between syntax and semantics; here, the syntactic (functional) category of case and the semantics it conveys (θ-roles) are closely linked. Yet, once again, an analysis that is based on purely structural grounds often misses the point. Take the following sentence:

(9)    *Her Offa Miercna cyning het Æþelbryhte rex þæt heafod ofaslean* (ASC 792 A)
*Her Offa Myrcena cining het Æðelbrihte þæt heafod ofslean* (ASC 792 E)
*Her Offa cing het Æðelberhte 'cinge' þæt heauod ofaslean* (ASC 792 F)
'In this year Offa, king of the Mercians, had Ethelbert beheaded'

To understand how a theta role confers a concept, it is helpful to understand first of all what exactly its function is. The dative *Æþelbrihte (cinge)* in the above sentence indicates an indirect object of a verb. But which verb, since there are two candidates, *hatan* 'order, command', and *ofaslean* 'cut off', both

transitive. Since the dative is usually concerned with a human receiver of some action or with an experiencer of some state it also means that this human being is only passively involved in the event. Unfortunately, no one can guess how this dative, *Æþelbrihte*, was conceptually construed, as a receiver of orders (*hatan*) or as an experiencer of beheading (*ofaslean*)? A similar problem arises with *hatan* and *wyrcan* 'work' and the personal pronoun *him* in *Beowulf* 2337

(10)    *Heht him þa gewyrcean wigendra hleo*
        *eallirenne, eorla dryhten, wigbord wrætlic*
        'Then the protector of warriors, the lord of earls, bade an iron shield, a
        splendid war-targe, to be wrought for him' (Gordon 1954: 52-53)

Though some structures should perhaps stay ambiguous, some richly deserve to be disambiguated and I think the above are among them.

As I have already said before, for all the interpretative importance of formal characteristics, the greatest promise to find the proper sense of the expressions may have nothing to do with the structure. Among the most promising clues are a comparison with other uses of the same lexical item(s), a wide contextual background, and extralinguistic knowledge.

My previous research on *hatan* and *hatan* compounds shows (Nagucka 1979, 1980) that this verb does not require an indirect object overtly specified. The information conferred by *hatan* has never precisely indicated who has been designated as the performer of the action, unless the direct object is human as in

(11)    *þa het se cyning hie sittan* (Bede 58/27)
        'then the king bade them sit down'

in which *hie* incorporates two elements, i.e. the recipient of the order and the performer of the order. Those are clear cases, but the fact remains that in other uses these thematic roles are not specified. Recognizing a need for their presence in the "cognitive mind" one must ask: what is going on here? The lexical information of *hatan* incorporates performativity, causativity (and transitivity), and in the speech acts understanding it expresses "the speaker's desire (in a form of a command, order, request, etc.) for the hearer to bring about the state of affairs expressed in the proposition" (Fraser 1975: 192). "Order performativity" demands an authority who has the power to order, which requirement has been satisfactorily fulfilled in our examples, *Offa – Miercna cyning, wigendra hleo – eorla dryhten*. An addressee (a hearer) of the command is expected to be lower in rank, an inferior in relation to the speaker, which, however, in our examples remains unknown; *Æþelbriht* (*rex, cinge*) is hardly a recipient of the command, though it is possible under very special circumstances of which we are not told, and *he* or *hie* (*him*) is too vague without further information. It is the state of af-

fairs to be brought out that seems to be the focus of the proposition, beheading, making an iron shield or building a borough, as in (12) where the dative does not occur at all:

(12)    *Her on þysum geare for Eadweard cyning mid fierde on ufan hærfest to*
        *þelwæle, 7 het gewyrcan þa burg* (ASC 923 A)
        'In this year after autumn King Edward went with the army to Thelwall
        and ordered the borough to be built'

As it happens, the verb *hatan* in our examples is rather unreliable and even misleading as a tool for identifying the thematic role of the dative. The identification evidence has to be looked for somewhere else, i.e. in the conceptual world of the speaker. Let us try to search for more information.

The *Chronicle* supplies no particulars about *Æþelbriht*, and according to the editor (61) "of the circumstances under which Ethelbert of East Anglia was put to death by Offa nothing is really known." This scant information we have in the *Chronicle* may well indicate that this historical fact, was still a well-known event at the time the entry was written down and did not require additional details. Later legendary accounts seem to confirm this: *Æþelbriht* was the sufferer of beheading and as a martyr became the patron saint of the see (Hereford).

On the basis of this I would assume that the dative *Æþelbrihte* is *dativus incommodi* of *ofaslean*. It is interesting to notice that the same usage of the dative is found in other inflected languages like Latin or Polish. Analogically, the dative *him* in (10) is *dativus commodi* of the verb *gewyrcan*, indicating a potential (future) receiver of the object which was ordered to be made, i.e. a shield. *Wyrcan* with the dative is used in the same manner in *Genesis* 2.18 when God says:

(13)    *uton wyrcean him sumne fultum to his gelicnysse*
        'Faciamus ei adiutorium simile sibi.'
        'Uczynię mu pomoc odpowiednią dla niego.'
        'I will make him an help meet for him.'

Here is an important caution, though: one should not get too excited about the presence of the dative, as the verb *wyrcan* could be used without it altogether as in (12). It is one thing to interpret semantically the dative used in the texts; it is quite another matter to imagine a possible conceptual setting at its source within the framework of our general psycholinguistic knowledge. If the two coincide on independent grounds there is a certain probability that our understanding of an old text goes in a right direction. In many cases the problem is not that the language cannot convey the complete conceptual information but that it does it only selectively. It is not uncommon for speakers to assume that some facts,

events, etc., are familiar and need not be mentioned, or that they are insignificant in a message and leave it incomplete. Thus, a syntactic analysis of thematic roles may prove insufficient to convey all conceptual aspects.

## 4. Word formation – compounding

The third linguistic area which shows that not all elements of semantic content are included in lexical items is connected with word formation and the grammatical relations with which it is linked. As it is a vast field of research I will be concerned with compounding only and will point to the problem analysing two examples: *godspell* 'gospel' and *middangeard* 'the world, earth'.

It has been customary since Lees (1965) to decompose compounds into their underlying structures. For example, a ModE *blackboard* is derived from a sentence: a board is black. Although the colour property of this object may nowadays vary, the word still pertains to "a dark-coloured board which teachers write on with chalk" (*Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*). To say that it was ambiguous or polysemous[1] at the beginning, as some cognitive semanticists would like it to be, and later metaphorized and shifted to a different semantic field to live its own life, may be a possible solution (though very much depending on the understanding of the term 'metaphor'). However, synchronically speaking, the compound which consists of an adjective and a noun is a set phrase of modification in which the first element modifies the second. Similarly, the Old English examples can be interpreted in the same way:

> *godspell* = *god* + *spell* 'good + story, account, tidings' ... *middangeard* = *middan* + *geard*, 'middle + dwelling, house, enclosed place'... (cf. Marchand 1969: 63 ff.) (Kastovsky 1992: 370)

That these observations go in a right direction is supported by other phrases of the adjective and noun structures, such as

> *halig spell* 'holy history' (*sacra historia*)
> *godlice geardas* 'goodly courts'

(Notice also that Old English dictionaries record a great many compounds with *spell*, as well as with *geard* or *eard*). Here I must hasten to add that besides *middangeard* Old English uses another compound *middaneard*. Though the two are semantically and phonologically close, they come from different sources. Unsuprisingly, these two are used for the same sense, for example Latin *mundus*

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[1] Notice what Sweetser (1990: 9) says: "No historical shift of meaning can take place without an intervening stage of polysemy."

is rendered either by *middangeard* or *middaneard*, e.g., the Gospel according to Saint Matthew 26.13

(14)   *Soð ic secge eow swa hwær swa þys godspel byð gebodud on eallum middanearde byð gesæd on hyre gemynd þæt heo ðiss dyde* – Anglo-Saxon
       *Soð ic segge eow. swa hwær swa þis godspel beoð geboded on eallen middenearde beoð ge ræd (sic) on hire ge-mynd þæt hyo þis dyde* – Anglo-Saxon
       *soðlice ic cuoeðo Iuh 7 sua huer sua bodad bið ðis god-spell in allum middangearde bið gesægd 7 þæt ti ðios dyde in gemynd hire* – Lindisfarne
       *soþ ic eow sæcge swa hwær swa bodad bið þis god-spel in allum middangearde ek bið sægd 7 þætte þios dyde in gemynd hiræ* – Rushworth
       *amen dico uobis ubicumque praedicatum fuerit hoc euangelium in toto mundo dicetur et quod haec fecit in memoriam eius*
       'Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, *there* shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her'.

Undoubtedly, these two compounds are structurally straightforward and so are general senses of their components. However, the objects for which they are used are not transparently deduced from the words themselves. Thus, first, a perplexing question must be confronted and answered: what are the concepts the compounds are meant to express?

The quest for the answer to that question must go beyond the linguistic means. Even as a purely semantic puzzle – what is a good story? what is a middle dwelling place? – the problem is hard enough, but it is additionally roiled by religious and philosophical views of the distant Early Middle Ages.

Jackendoff (1997: 62 ff.) discussing adjective-noun modification, which has been assumed to be an intermediate stage of our *godspell* and *middangeard*, says when referring, to a good knife: "*Good* evaluates an object in its capacity to serve some function; in the absence of a specified function... the default function is chosen from the specification of proper function in the qualia structure of the noun" (1997: 63). Under this conception, the contents of the adjectives *god* and *middan* in our examples would be expected to be elements of qualia structures of the nouns in question. Notice that the evaluative adjective *god* and the descriptive adjective (spatial) *middan* – which are additionally polysemous – involve the qualia of the structures of *spell* and *geard* respectively. The qualia are not characteristics internal to syntax (Jackendoff 1997: 64) but to the pragmatic knowledge connected with the nouns: *spell* and *geard*.

From the conceptual perspective, the compounds under discussion present each a different scenario. According to Ælfric (Bosworth) *godspell* stands for Latin *evangelium, id est, bonum nuntium*. The English rendering is a loan translation; so far the sense of the word, general as it is, does not specify the kind of story, relation, news or whatever the expression is used for. Structurally speaking there is nothing here to justify any limitation of the word's semantic reference "to the message and teachings of Jesus Christ, as explained in the New Testament" (*Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*). *Spell* need not be good, but as it refers to the words of God – the qualia of the structure of the noun 'penetrate' into the adjective *god*. In other words, we learn that the tidings are good from the angel when he says:

(15)   *Ic eom gabriel ic þe stande beforan gode;*
       *and ic eom asend wið þe sprecan. and þe ðis bodian* (*The Gospel according to Saint Luke* 1.19)
       'I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings'

or from Saint Mark relating Jesus' preaching:

(16)   *com se hælend on galileam godes rices. godspell bodigende and þus cweðende ...* (*The Gospel acording to Saint Mark* 1.14-5)
       'Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, And saying ...'
       (OE *bodian* – tell, announce, proclaim, preach; Lat. nuntiare, enuntiare, narrare, prædicare, evangelizare)

Once again, an extra linguistic knowledge helps us make interpretive sense of the compound. This is even more evident in the case of *middaneard*. This word stands for Latin *mundus l cosmus* (sic!) (Ælfric 1880: 297); it is not a loan translation, neither is it a simple sense rendering. Surprisingly enough, this word was formed in spite of the fact that there were other lexical items in Old English which could have been used for the sense of Latin *mundus*. They are *weorold* 'world', *eorþe* 'earth', *folde* 'earth', and even uncompounded *eard* 'land' or *geard* 'dwelling place'. However, at closer scrutiny each of these words is somehow restricted in usage and refers to country, district, territory, ground, soil, often in opposition to the sea, and their Latin equivalents would be rather *terra, regio, tractus, territorium, secula, tellus*. Observations of these lexical data and their use show that the qualia structure (using Jackendoff's term) of the Lat. *mundus* cannot be easily expressed by any of these already existing nouns by themselves. Thus, an adjective *middan* is selected in default of the proper qualia. But why *middan*? Because it was then widely believed that the world was a disc

or sphere, and the portion which was inhabited by men was completely encircled by waters, hence it was located between heaven and hell[2] that is in the middle. For Isidore of Seville the earth "was shaped like a wheel with its boundaries encircled by the ocean. Round the earth were concentric spheres bearing the planets and stars, and beyond the last sphere was highest heaven, the abode of the blessed" (Crombie 1957: 12). This view prevails for many centuries (cf. Ælfric's *De Temporibus Anni* 4/5; by the way, the sentence was taken over literally by Byrhtferth (Henel 1970: 85)). This view of the world justifies the use of *middan* which embodies the qualia of the conceptual image and evaluates the object in its capacity. Without such "astronomical" knowledge the true meaning of *middangeard*, no matter how naive it sounds to us, would have remained unknown or at least obscure. To finish these remarks about *middangeard* let me quote some lines from *Cædmon's Hymn* which in a poetic way express the vision of the world

(17)   *he ærest gesceop ylda bearnum*
       *heofon to hrofe, halig scyppend,*
       *middangearde mancynnes weard;*
       *ece drihten æfter tida*
       *firum on foldum, frea ælmyhtig.* (Lehnert 1955: 33, 96)

       'He first created for the children of men
       Heaven as a roof, did the holy Creator;
       Then the Guardian of mankind, the eternal Ruler,
       Later formed the universe,
       The almighty Lord built the earth for men.'

       (It may be interesting to add that the *Middle English Dictionary* records this word only up to c. 1300.)

The semantic penetration into Old English compounds provides enough evidence that syntactic structure and lexical decomposition are not alone sufficient for a good grasp of a conceptual framework.

I would like to conclude the paper by saying that all the Old English structures which I have analysed have one feature in common: they are not always

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[2] For OE *middangeard* Bosworth quotes the following: "The Icel. Edda has preserved the true mythical bearing of the word. – The earth (midgard), the abode of men, is seated in the middle of the universe, bordered by mountains and surrounded by the great sea (uthaf); on the other side of this sea is Ut-gard, the abode of giants; the Midgard' is defended by the As-gard (*the burgh of the gods*), lying in the middle (the heaven being conceived as rising above the earth). Thus the earth and mankind are represented as a stronghold besieged by the powers of evil from without, defended by the gods from above and from within."

"visible" and detectable semantically through their syntactic and lexical structure alone; this way the idea of the centrality of syntax is somehow falsified. The lexical properties very often fail to encode the conceptual world and in the end pragmatic, psychological and other criteria have to be considered. The safest situation is when such final resources are made use of with respect to a contemporary – then spoken – living language, as they are easily verified, or when these criteria are universally valid, applicable also to old historical texts. A historical linguist must on any account try to avoid the danger of applying his own point of view to old data. In order to envision a possible conceptual world behind the given wording one has to imagine a possible setting for it. For all these reasons, the searching pain a historical linguist may often suffer appears to be an unavoidable necessity to approximate the conceptual world of the speaker of the distant past.

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