THE POSITION OF NEGATIVE ADJECTIVES IN AELFRIC'S *CATHOLIC HOMILIES I*

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Abstract

In Old English, negative adjectives, i.e. incorporating the negative prefix -*un*, are said to generally come in postposition to nouns (e.g. Fischer, 2001; Sampson, 2010). This paper investigates to what extent this general rule is followed in Aelfric's *Catholic Homilies*, the texts of this author being a typical choice for the study of Old English syntax (cf. Davis 2006; Reszkiewcz, 1966; Kohonen, 1978). The data have been obtained from the York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose (YCOE). The following research questions have been formulated: Do strong negative adjectives outnumber non-negated adjectives in postposition? Do strong negative adjectives have a tendency to appear in postposition? Do strong negated adjectives occur in preposition? The results indicated that for the sample analyzed, strong adjectives in postposition are not predominantly negated. Additionally, the postposition of most of those which are may potentially be explained by other factors, such as modification by a prepositional phrase, co-occurrence with a weak preposed adjective (both mentioned by Fischer), or indirect Latin influence in a formulaic phrase. Also, the data does not appear to support the observation that negated adjectives tend to appear in post- rather than preposition.

Key words: negative adjectives, noun phrase, Old English, prose

1. Introduction

In Old English, the position of the adjective against the head noun was not fixed. The language allowed some degree of variability in that respect. For prose, Mitchell (1985, §159) observes that the most common pattern is adjectives in preposition, but this is by no means exclusive: examples follow of a lone adjective in post-position (§160), two adjectives preceding (§167) or following (§168) the noun, one adjective before, the other after the noun (§169).

Different authors (Fischer, 2000, 2001; Haumann, 2010; Pysz, 2009) have observed that among others, a combination of the adjective's inflection type and its attributive or predicative use is a factor in whether the modifying element in question is preposed or postposed.

1.1 Weak/strong inflection

A consensus obtains that there is a connection between the position of the adjective and the type of its inflection.

As a member of the Germanic family, Old English had two sets of adjective endings: strong and weak. The former were inherited from Proto Indo-European, while the latter are "a remarkable construction" for which the so-called n-inflection was generalized (Lehman, 1974).

Old English weak adjectives typically, almost invariably precede their nouns. (Perridon & Sleeman, 2011, pp. 15-16; Fischer, 2001, p. 249). Then, one of the following applies: a distal or proximal demonstrative preceding, a possessive pronoun or NP in genitive preceding, adjective in vocative, in comparative degree, or superlative degree when preceded by a demonstrative or possessive. When preposed, strong adjectives are usually found when none of the above circumstances hold (Pysz, 2009, pp. 3-4). Strong adjectives, however, can be found in pre- as well as postposition against the head noun (Perridon & Sleeman, 2011, pp. 15-16; Fischer, 2001, p. 249).

1.2 Attributive/predicative use

According to Pysz (2009), who considers the issue from the theoretical standpoint of generative grammar, the varying surface position of adjectives is the corollary of "their different base generation sites in syntax". This means that preposed adjectives function as adjuncts to NPs, can be stacked as such, regardless of whether they are weak or strong, and are attributive in nature. Conversely, postposed adjectives are reduced relatives, cannot as such be stacked, and are predicative in nature – unless "falsely postposed", in constructions such as conjunction + adjective and noun + demonstrative + adjective, where they are also attributive (pp. 286-287).

Fischer (2001) further links the adjective's attributive or predicative use with the grammatical dichotomy of theme versus rheme. Invoking Bolinger's logic, she argues that the adjective position in Old English was motivated iconically, the assumption being that elements perceived earlier have a bearing on the interpretation of what follows. Accordingly, preposed weak adjectives are seen as attributive, "inseparable" from the head noun, since "together with the noun phrase they form the 'theme' of the utterance" (p. 271), thematicity typifying definite NPs (p. 258). Strong adjectives occurring post-nominally are in this model considered predicative, "and they therefore give new information about the noun phrase, i.e. they are rhematic with respect to the noun that they modify" (p. 271). Where Fischer's and Pysz's respective accounts differ is in their treatment of strong adjectives preceding the noun: for Pysz, preposed adjectives are attributive regardless of their inflectional patterning, while Fischer, interestingly, believes that strong adjectives in the prenominal position are also predicative and rhematic, because for this function, "Old English could use … the same order as Present-day English" (that is preposing the adjective). This is supported by the observation that strong preposed adjectives appear predominantly in indefinite NPs, which as such "tend not to be thematic" (2001, p. 257). This, for Fischer, does not rule out iconicity, which in such contexts is no longer "linear" but instead "phonological", meaning that stress rather than word order was likely

employed to render the adjective's rhematicity. The author herself recognizes an obvious caveat here, namely that "without a native speaker of Old English we have no way of knowing" (p. 271).

1.3 Negated adjectives

Fischer (2001, p. 259) remarks that strong adjectives display a set of properties which testify to their "strong verbalness". One concerns the "incorporation of negative element". A negative element, here the Old English prefix *un-*, is seen as tightly linked to the predicate, so strong, predicative adjectives should readily allow negation, and, according to the principle of linear iconicity, favor postposition: Fisher writes that one "striking" observation to be made on the strength of her data is that postnominal strong adjectives are much more often negated than not (pp. 263-264). This is evidently picked up by Sampson (2010), who observes that some postnominal adjectives she found in poetry (in *Beowulf*, to be precise) "reflect more general rules in prose associated with particular lexical items or morphemes, such as the tendency of negated adjectives beginning with *un-* … to appear postnominally" (p. 95). Also, when the head noun is accompanied by two strong adjectives and one of them has to follow, it is "usually" the negated one that does so (pp. 263-264).

2. The study

2.1 Aims

The aim of this study is to verify the claim that the incorporation of a negative element by the adjective can be seen as an indicator of strong verbalness. The following research questions have been formulated: Do strong negated adjectives outnumber strong non-negated adjectives in postposition? Do strong negated adjectives have a tendency to appear in postposition? Do strong negated adjectives occur in preposition? Do weak negated adjectives occur?

2.2 Sample and Procedure

Fischer (2001) formulates her theory as regards negated adjectives on the basis of multiple Old English texts. For this study, only the first series of Aelfric's *Catholic Homilies* (comprising forty homilies) was selected. Aelfric's works are a typical choice for the study of Old English syntax (cf. Davis, 2006; Reszkiewcz, 1966; Kohonen, 1978; and many others).

The data for the study has been obtained from the York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose (YCOE). The following queries were used for data extraction:

((NP* iDominates ADJ*^N) AND (NP* iDominates N^N|NR^N) AND (N^N|NR^N Precedes ADJ*^N)) – this yielded all nominal phrases containing a noun which precedes

the adjective and agrees with it for case, here nominative.[1] ((NP* iDominates ADJ*^G) AND (NP* iDominates N^G|NR^G) AND (N^G|NR^G Precedes ADJ*^G)) was used for genitive, ((NP* iDominates ADJ*^A) AND (NP* iDominates N^A|NR^A) AND (N^A|NR^A Precedes ADJ*^A)) for accusative, and ((NP* iDominates ADJ*^D) AND (NP* iDominates N^D|NR^D) AND (N^D|NR^D Precedes ADJ*^D)) for dative. Some instances tagged as adjectives in the corpus were rejected, namely the variants of *self*, whose position with respect to the noun was informed by its two discrete meanings: it could function similarly to Present Day English pronouns *myself*, *yourself*, *himself* etc., in which case it was categorically postnominal; if it preceded the noun, it had the meaning of *same*. Also, cases where the head noun is both followed and preceded by a negated adjective were not included (one such instance was found). Next, the noun phrases thus obtained were manually divided into those with nouns modified by negated adjectives (with the negative prefix *un-*) and those modified by non-negated adjectives. Whether an adjective was weak or strong was determined on the strength of its inflectional endings as presented in Fischer (2001, p. 250). Also, the noun phrases were rejected which had nouns modified by ambiguous adjectives, i.e. such whose strong and weak endings may be identical: these include plural datives in *-um* and plural genitives in *-ra*.

The following query was formulated for all negative adjectives: ((NP* iDominates ADJ*) AND (NP* iDominates N^N|N^A|N^D|N^G) AND (ADJ* iDominates un*)). NPs with negative adjectives in postposition were already processed with the previous set of queries for all NPs with adjectives in postposition. Here they were manually separated from NPs containing negative adjectives in preposition, which were then divided by adjectival endings, weak or strong. NPs with ambiguous adjectives were again excluded.

2.3 Results

Table 1 shows the distribution of negated and, where relevant to the study, non-negated adjectives in relation to the noun.

	negated		non-negated	
	strong	weak	strong	weak
in postposition	11	0	21	4
in preposition	43	30		

Table 1. Negated and non-negated adjectives against the head noun in
Aelfric's *Catholic Homilies*

As evidenced by the numbers, in the sample analyzed, strong negated adjectives do not occur in postposition more frequently than non-negated ones. This is against Fischer's claim. Also, contrary to what Sampson suggests, negative adjectives do not tend to appear in postposition more often than in preposition. In addition, it is common for preposed

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[1] Fischer (2001) notices that participles are more verbal in nature and as such favor postposition, so in order to control for this variable, they were not included in the study (in the corpus, they go with different tagging than adjectives).

negative adjectives to decline weak, which in such contexts, and as would be the case regardless of the presence or absence of a negative element, imbues them with attributive and not predicative qualities, according to the circumstances expanded on by Fischer.

3. Analysis and discussion

3.1 Negative adjectives in postposition

Perhaps it should be noted that while the variation in adjective placement has received considerable attention in literature, a visible preference in prose is for adjectives to ensconce before the nouns they accompany. Postposition is somewhat of a rarity. The figures in Sampson (2010, p. 102) demonstrate that the phenomenon is relatively infrequent. Using the YCOE, Sampson found 699 postposed adjectives (in positive degree) in over 30,000 possible contexts she looked at. This encourages a closer qualitative analysis.

In Aelfric's *Catholic Homilies*, a total of eleven noun phrases with nouns modified by strong negated adjectives in postposition were identified. On the other hand, there are over twice as many postposed adjectives (strong, but also weak) which are not negated – this figure stands at twenty-five. This seems out of keeping with Fischer's observations that the postnominal placement favors the incorporation of a negative element. Examining the results at close quarters, however, reveals that there is a high number of tokens within a small set of types, for both negated and non-negated adjectives in postposition. Among the former, the following three types were found in postposition:

(1) Sind ðeah-hwæðere forwel mænige ***rihtwise   unscyldige*** wið heafod-leahtras
Are nevertheless   very   many   *righteous guiltless*   with deadly-sins
(There are, nevertheless, very many righteous guiltless of deadly sins)
cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_24

(2) and his efen-ealdan ***lytlingas   unscæððige*** arleaslice acwealde
and his equal-in-age *little ones innocent*   impiously killed
(and impiously killed the innocent little ones, his equals in age)
cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_5

(3) hí   ðry   án ***God untodæledlic***
they three one *God indivisible*
(these three one God indivisible)
cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_9

The adjectives in (1) and (2) are each the only token of the type.

In (1), the presence of a prepositional phrase should be noted. Fisher (2001, p. 259) observes that if "the adjective is modified by a prepositional phrase in Old English, the whole adjective phrase follows the noun" as a rule. This is supported by Pysz (2009, pp. 108-109), in whose corpus-based study "not a single construction has been retrieved"

of an adjective and its complement, in any order relative to each other, preceding the noun. It appears, therefore, that the PP modification may favor the postposition of an adjective, and this is regardless of whether it is negated or not.

Pysz (2006, p. 75) additionally remarks that "whenever both an adjective and its complement appear in postposition to the noun, the former usually surfaces before the latter"; this order regularly obtains also in Present-Day English, where, according to Fischer, linear iconicity is no longer operative. Consequently, while Fischer does write that modification by a PP reinforces the verbalness of strong adjectives, it is somewhat unclear how the said verbalness is supposed to be "linked to position" according to "perceptual linearity suggested by Bolinger" (2001, p. 258). It would be then interesting to learn how many strong adjectives actually occur in postposition when not modified by a PP – that is when linear iconicity would be the sole motivation for postposition, in other words, under the circumstances as *un edificio hermoso*, "a building beautiful", which she quotes from Bolinger, when the adjective denotes a "temporary" property (2001, p. 255)

In (2), one interesting thing is to be noticed: the noun appears to be draped with two adjectives, which, according to Fischer (2006), "generally only happens when the adjectives were strong". This may be so because she links the presence of a weak preposed adjective with the definiteness of the NP, and strong adjectives are said to appear in indefinite NPs. Consequently, since one NP cannot be definite and indefinite at the same time, strong and weak adjectives should not co-occur. Two strong adjectives could be accommodated into one NP, but since, in Fischer's view, stacking is generally not permitted in OE, one will precede the noun, and the other one will follow it (p. 125), and "it is usually the negative one that follows" (Fischer, 2001, p. 264). Strong negated *unscæððige* is postposed, indeed.

However, this is not the case of two strong adjectives flanking the noun: the preposed *efen-ealdan* is weak, being preceded by a possessive. Pysz (2009, p. 247) discusses similar examples and concludes that strong adjectives are "predicative …, predicating of the entities which have already been identified". Fischer (2001, p. 266) uses similar examples to once more emphasize differences between weak and strong adjectives. In neither account do the examples include strong negated adjectives, however; these adjectives are postposed because of their predicative character, which Pysz explains in terms of their generation as a reduced relative, while Fischer quotes linear iconicity. In any case, referring to the incorporation of a negative element seems unnecessary.

The adjective in (3), *untodæledlic*, is repeated nine times, and on eight of these occasions, it modifies the noun *God*. In six, the noun *God* is directly preceded by the strong *an*, and in two cases, it is premodified by the strong adjective *ælmihtig*:

(5) an   ælmihtig ***god untodæledlic***
    one almighty *god indivisible*
    (one almighty God indivisible)
    cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_18

Given the data at hand, it is tempting to see *god untodæledlic*, the most frequent example of a negated adjective postmodification, as formulaic. In support of this view, it is not only the NP that recurs: it appears to be part of the same context – when the Holy

Trinity is mentioned – comprising largely formulaic chunks. Some of the examples are as follows:

(6) hi   ðry   an ***god untodæledlic***: þry   on hadum & an god on anre godcundnesse
    they three one *god indivisible*   three on persons & one god on one godhead
    (these three one God indivisible; three in persons, and one God in one Godhead)
    cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_9

(7) hi   sind þry   on hadum, fæder & sunu & halig gast
    they are three on persons father & son   & holy ghost
    & an   ***god untodæledlic*** on anre godcundnysse.
    & one *god indivisible*   on one godhead
    (They are three in persons, Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost, and one *God indivisible*,
    in one Godhead.)
    cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_13

(8) sindon þry   on hadum. & an   ***god untodæledlic*** on anre godcundnysse wuniende.
    are   three on persons & one *god indivisible*   on one godhead   existing
    (are three in persons, and one God indivisible, existing in one Godhead)
    cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_22

(9) hi   þry   an ***god untodæledlic***: on anre godcundnysse wuniende.
    they three one *god indivisible*   on one godhead   existing
    (these three one God indivisible, existing in one Godhead)
    cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_15

Another common phrase in which one of God's attributes is expressed by a postposed adjective is *God ælmihtig*, "God almighty"; Mitchell gives this example to suggest that certain cases of postposition in Old English can be explained through the influence of Latin, where adjectives would typically follow their nouns (*Deus omnipotens*). *God untodæledlic* is not a direct calque from Latin, but it is not impossible that it follows the pattern of the more frequent *God ælmihtig*, and the adjective in postposition once again just happens to be negated. Also, Bartnik (2011), following Longobardi, suggests that proper names would move to the left of the adjective in the absence of an overt determiner to take its place and ensure that the NP is referential (pp. 37-38).[2] This may explain the noun + adjective pattern when *god* is not accompanied by a demonstrative without invoking an adjective's morphology.

The ninth instance of *untodæledlic* in postposition is provided in (10):

(10) and is ðeah-hwæðere heora Đreora   ***weorc untodæledlic***
    and is nevertheless   that of-Three *work indivisible*
    (and is, nevertheless, the indivisible work of the three)
    cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_13

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[2] It needs to be noted, however, that in the analyzed sample, *untodæledlic*, unlike *ælmihtig*, does not premodify the noun *God* along the lines of "se untodæledlic God*".

"The indivisible work" (which is humanity) is also presented as "the work of the Three", and the phrase directly precedes (7), so perhaps the adjective is postposed for stylistic or rhythmical reasons – Aelfric has been frequently described as an author "evolving a more rhythmical and alliterative style" (Hill, 2009, p. 49).

3.2 Non-negated adjectives in postposition

There are twenty-one noun phrases with strong non-negated adjectives in postposition. Seventeen of them are *God* (*fæder*) *ælmihtig*:

(11) An angin is ealra þinga þæt is **god ælmihtig**
    one origin is all   things that is *god almighty*
    (There is one origin of all things, that is God Almighty)
    cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_1

(12) & habban anweald & rice   ongean **gode ælmihtigum**.
    & have   power   & authority against *god   almighty*
    (and have power and sway against God Almighty)
    cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_1

(13) ge habbað ænne hlaford **god ælmihtigne**.
    ye have   one lord,   *god almighty*
    (you have one Lord, God Almighty)
    cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_29

The remaining four strong postposed adjectives are *cynelic*, *beorhtne*, *leof*, and *leohtbeamede*.

Additionally, there are four cases of weak non-negated adjectives in postposition, which would require its own investigation, but falls outside the scope of this study. Overall, the numbers lend little support to Fischer's claim that it is negated adjectives that are preferred in postposition over non-negated ones.

3.3 Negated adjectives in preposition

Fischer does not seem to claim outright that negated adjectives are rarer in preposition than in postposition, only that postposed adjectives are more often negated than not. Sampson (2010, p. 95), on the other hand, writes about the "tendency" of the *un-* adjectives to follow their nouns rather than precede them. It is not quite clear what data she bases this statement on, but right on its heels, to explain "deviations from the prose norm", comes a reference to Fischer (2001) and the iconic logic she promotes. Indeed, if one aligns themselves with the said theory, negated adjectives, and as such predicative, would be expected to occur at a lesser rate in the position associated with attribution, that is left of the head noun.

In the analyzed sample, there are forty-three cases of strong negated adjectives in preposition. These include, to give but a few examples:

(14) and he foresende   his acennednysse ***ungewunelice sibbe***
    and he sent-before his birth   *unwonted   peace*
    (and he sent before his birth unwonted peace)
    cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_2

(15) Ge wiðstandað þam Halgum Gaste mid stiðum swuran, and ***ungeleaffulre heortan***
    you withstand that holy   ghost with stiff   neck   and *unbelieving   heart*
    (You withstand the Holy Ghost with stiff neck and unbelieving heart)
    cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_3

(16) Nu smeað sum ***undeopðancol   man***
    now inquire some *shallow-thinking man*
    (Now some shallow-thinking man will inquire)
    cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_20

As mentioned earlier, Fischer maintains that strong adjectives in preposition are "presumably" predicative as well, and this is according to phonological iconicity. However, this assumption, by her own admission, is difficult to verify for lack of native speakers of Old English (2001, p. 271). Consequently, the incorporation of a negative element by such adjectives cannot be unequivocally seen as testifying to their verbal nature.

Additionally, weak negated adjectives in preposition are well-represented in the material and amount to thirty cases. Their inflection always results from one of the circumstances listed for weak preposed adjectives in a). In (17), this is the presence of a distal demonstrative:

(17) **se** ungesewenlica wulf
    the invisible   wolf
    (the invisible wolf)
    cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_2

In (18), this is the presence of a possessive pronoun:

(18) **heora** ungeleaffullan heortan 3
    their unbelieving   hearts
    (their unbelieving hearts)
    cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_3

In (19), this is the presence of a noun phrase in genitive:

(19) to þæs **cyninges** untruman bearne
    to that king's   sick   son
    (to the king's sick son)
    cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_8

In (20), the adjective is in vocative:

(20) þu   **unclæna** deofol
    you unclean   devil
    (you unclean devil)
    cocathom1,ÆCHom_I,_31

Therefore, there seems to be nothing that would distinguish the behavior of negated adjectives in preposition from this of non-negated adjectives. Weak negated adjectives occur in preposition to the head noun, in phrases that are overtly marked for definiteness, so according to Fischer's theory, they are attributive, and thus, more nominal than verbal. In any case, preposed negated adjectives visibly outnumber their postposed counterparts, which fails to confirm a "tendency", referred to by Sampson, for the *un-* adjectives to postmodify the noun.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of negative adjectives in Aelfric's *Catholic Homilies* seems to suggest that contrary to what certain authors claim, the incorporation of a negative element is barely a predictor of an adjective's position or a reliable indicator of its verbalness in this particular set of texts. The quantitative analysis revealed that in the sample, strong adjectives in postposition are not predominantly negated. Additionally, the postposition of most of those which are may potentially be explained by other factors, such as modification by a prepositional phrase, co-occurrence with a weak preposed adjective, or indirect Latin influence in a formulaic phrase. Also, the data does not appear to support the observation that negated adjectives tend to appear in post- rather than preposition: most negated adjectives come before their head nouns. What is more, many of them are declined weak, which is understood to characterize attributive, nominal adjectives instead of predicative, verbal ones. It is, of course, indisputable that the "use of a negative element is very closely connected with the predicate, i.e. the verbal element of the clause … [and n]ouns as entities are not normally negated" (Fischer, 2001, p. 263); adjectives, however, irrespective of their function, are neither, and the data in this particular study suggests that citing the incorporation of a negative element as encoding verbalness is somewhat risky. If analyzing a larger sample turns out not to support the findings of this study, it may in its turn indicate the existence of some important idiosyncrasies on the Noun Phrase level in different Old English texts and/or authors.

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