Lilo Moessner:  *Early Middle English Syntax*

Reviewed by Kikuo Tōyama, Toita Women’s Junior College

This work by Moessner is a linguistic study on early Middle English syntax, originally written in German as a *Habilitationsschrift* at the University of Freiburg. The author presents descriptive models of the syntactic structures exemplified in 33 texts of the early Middle English period. The framework of her description is based on the theory of Axiomatic Functionalism developed by Jan Mulder under the influence of Prague School
Linguistics and Hjelmslev’s Glossematics. The book consists of ten chapters: Chapter I, ‘Introduction’ (pp. 1-23), Chapter II, ‘Compulsory Constituents of Early Middle English Clauses’ (pp. 24-52), Chapter III, ‘Nominal Syntagms’ (pp. 53-83), Chapter IV, ‘Functional Syntagms’ (pp. 84-97), Chapter V, ‘The Predicative Syntagm’ (pp. 98-136), Chapter VI, ‘The Clause’ (pp. 137-54), Chapter VII, ‘Functional Constructions’ (pp. 155-71), Chapter VIII, ‘Conjunctive Constructions’ (pp. 172-8), Chapter IX, ‘Syntagms with Coordinated ICs’ (pp. 179-83), Chapter X, ‘Syntagms with Interordinated ICs’ (pp. 184-7).

Chapter I is a general introduction to the analysis presented in the book. The chapter begins with a survey of the research on ME syntax. This is followed by a brief sketch of the theory of Axiomatic Functionalism, the author’s main approach to linguistic phenomena. Next, Moessner explains the place of syntax in this theory before she clarifies the central conception of syntactic relations defined by Axiomatic Functionalism.

Chapter II describes the syntactic structure of the finite verb phrase. Moessner does not accept this syntactic category, but sets up three separate models: ‘active verbal syntagm,’ ‘copulative syntagm,’ and ‘passive syntagm.’ The active verbal syntagm is defined as the combination of a verbal nucleus and one or more peripheral elements. These peripheral elements occupy their own respective positions to their nucleus according to their syntactic properties. This reasoning enables her to present a model of the active verbal syntagm as follows:

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  negation
  modal
  { tense
  aspect
  periphrasis
  } ---> verb.
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This diagram is designed to indicate that the peripheral elements on the left side can expand the verbal nucleus on the right side, and that both ‘negation’ and ‘modal’ determine the verb together, while ‘tense,’ ‘aspect,’ and ‘periphrasis’ can not be realized at the same time. The labels ‘tense,’ ‘aspect,’ and ‘periphrasis’ here mean respectively haben or ben forming the periphrastic perfect, ben with the present participle, and the auxiliary ginnen or don. Applied to an example with the periphrastic perfect preceded by a modal auxiliary Ic mitte habbe bet idon (Poema Morale 15) quoted on p. 30, the model of the active verbal syntagm yields the following analysis:
It is pertinent, here, to point out that Moessner (pp. 39-40) offers some valuable suggestions concerning the usage of the auxiliary don. She concludes from contextual arguments that doð in the following example is deliberately used for the purpose of emphasizing the meaning of the nuclear verb: se þet eþhte wile hialde wel þe hwile þe hi mot wælde, þiene hi for godes lone, þanne doð be hi wel ibialde (Poema Morale 55f.). According to her view, a pair of verbs wælde 'keep' and þiene 'give away' exhibit a semantic contrast. On the other hand, there is also a semantic contrast, she supposes, between two auxiliaries of another pair of verb phrases, wile hialde and doð . . . ibialde. She maintains that this rhetorical arrangement of two pairs of semantic contrast provides evidence to the use of emphatic don in the early ME period. If this holds true, Mustanoja (pp. 606-7) is wrong in saying that emphatic don does not occur until the 15th century, as she points out.

Like the active verbal syntagm, Moessner assigns the copulative syntagm and the passive syntagm to their own particular syntactic models respectively. She sets up three separate models because these three syntagms differ from each other in their internal structure as well as in the possible types of complementary elements which they can govern. In particular, she attempts to justify establishing an independent category for the passive voice (pp. 47-8 and 99-100).

In Chapter III, Moessner deals with the relation between the noun and its various modifiers forming the noun phrase which she calls 'substantival syntagm.' She concludes from her data that seven different peripheral positions have to be distinguished in the model of the substantival syntagms as follows:
What is most significant here is that Moessner sets up three different peripheral positions: 'quantifier,' 'deicticum,' and 'ordinal.' The 'deicticum' position can be realized by possessive pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, articles, or nouns in genitive case (= 'genitival syntagms'), while indefinite pronouns and numerals can occupy the same 'quantifier' position. Moreover, the 'ordinal' position is only for oper. Moessner (p. 36) classifies the possessive pronoun and demonstrative pronoun into the same group, and speculates that they can not occur together.

However, from this reviewer's point of view, Moessner's analysis in this instance seems unreasonable. Nakao (p. 393) cites from the fifteenth-century text a few examples of demonstrative + possessive + (adjective) + noun: this my present testament (Paston letters and papers [Davis] 194, 4); pe same your suppliant (ibid. 488, 20). Therefore it can not be safely assumed that this construction common in OE has already perished in the early ME period.

The discussion in Chapters V and VI seems to be the most significant part of this study. In Chapter VI, Moessner proposes the hypothesis that 'predicate' is the only obligatory element in early ME clauses which may be expanded by the optional elements such as 'subject' and 'adverbial complement.' The predicate as the nucleus of clauses can only be realized by 'predicative syntagm' consisting of 'predicative nucleus' and 'predicative complement.' Various types of the predicative syntagms are enumerated in Chapter V.

Before turning to this classification, Moessner describes the syntactic properties of predicative syntagms, introducing a daring innovation in considering transitivity and intransitivity. Transitivity and intransitivity are usually attributed to verbs. But Moessner maintains that these syntactic properties are those of predicative syntagms, not of verbs. Thus, she defines 'intransitive' predicative syntagms as 'syntagms containing no further ICs,' and calls 'syntagms containing a further IC,' 'non-intransitive' predicative syntagms. On the other hand, she postulates that 'transitive' predicative syntagms have a passive counterpart, while 'non-transi-
tive’ predicative syntagms do not.

Based on this reasoning, Moessner classifies various eME predicative syntagms into eleven types: type (1) copulative, intransitive, type (2) active verbal, intransitive, type (3) passive, intransitive, type (4) copulative, non-transitive, one predicative complement, type (5) copulative, non-intransitive, more than one predicative complement, type (6) passive, non-intransitive, one predicative complement, type (7) passive, non-intransitive, more than one predicative complement, type (8) active verbal, non-intransitive, one predicative complement, transitive, type (9) active verbal, non-intransitive, one predicative complement, non-transitive, type (10) active verbal, non-intransitive, more than one predicative complement, transitive, type (11) active verbal, non-intransitive, more than one predicative complement, non-transitive. This classification is partly dependent on whether the predicative syntagm contains one predicative complement or more than one. It is likely that Moessner sets up this criterion under the influence of Helbig’s valency theory.

The number of predicative complements, however, seems an inadequate criterion for classification of predicative syntagms. According to Moessner, the following two instances belong to the same group: type (10) active verbal, non-intransitive, more than one predicative complement, transitive; beo him wolden finden hauekes & hundes (Layamon’s Brut 3257f.) quoted on p. 128; and Ihesu ... yef hym onswere (The Passion of Our Lord 267) quoted on p. 113. But him in the first instance may be interpreted as an optional element of the verb finden, while hym in the second example can be considered as an obligatory element of the verb yef. In other words, it seems reasonable to suppose that these two constructions differ from each other in the syntactic property of one of two predicative complements. However, Moessner’s classification is not effective in distinguishing these two predicative syntagms. Therefore it would be better to establish another criteria according to whether the predicative complement is obligatory or optional, adopting Helbig’s method of describing sentence patterns (pp. 619–34).

As mentioned before, in Chapter VI Moessner points out that the subject is a mere optional expansion of the predicate as well as the adverbal complement. In the sentence consisting of two clauses Ne wuor pu neuer so wod ne so wyn-drunke pat éuer sege pone wyfe alle pone wille (The Proverbs of Alfred 269f.) quoted on p. 137, the first clause contains the subject pu, while the second does not. But she admits that subjects occupy a special syntactic position compared with other optional elements in eME clauses. The relation between subject and predicate is evidently expressed by concord of person and number. In contrast, there is no concord between
adverbal complement and predicate. Consequently Moessner defines the subject as a complementary element in clauses connected to the verb by concord of person and number.

Other syntactic categories of less importance are discussed in Chapters II, III, and VII. The internal structure of 'adjective syntagm' and 'pronominal syntagm' functioning as expansions of substantival nuclei are described in Chapter II together with the substantival syntagm. Chapter III deals with 'prepositional syntagm,' 'conjunctival syntagm,' 'comparative syntagm,' and 'genitival syntagm.' The prepositional and genitival syntagm can not only realize the peripheral position in a substantival syntagm, but also expand the predicative nuclei as an object. In contrast to these, two syntagsms, the conjunctival syntagm and the comparative syntagm (=a special case of the conjunctival syntagm) allow predicative syntagms and clauses in the peripheral position. This property is shared with 'infinite construction,' 'relative construction,' and 'participle construction' treated in Chapter VII.

The phenomena observed in Chapters VIII, IX, and X may have much less significance for the eME syntactic system. Chapter VIII concentrates on the relation between more than one clause or element connected by a coordinate conjunction. Following this, various kinds of appositive elements such as words and words, words and phrases, words and clauses, and phrases and clauses are analyzed in Chapter IX. Moessner defines such independence in function and occurrence as is shown in a relation between these appositive elements as 'coordinating.' On the other hand, what she calls 'interordination' (=mutual dependence in function and occurrence) is illustrated in Chapter X. In this chapter, she discusses the eME counterparts of the ModE constructions he is easy to please and the more ... the better.

Here it may be worth pointing out that the author suggests information about topics other than those mentioned before. Especially noteworthy is her penetrating analyses involving one modal auxiliary following another (pp. 31-2), impersonal constructions (pp. 138-44), and concatenated relative clauses (pp. 166-8). In spite of these contributions, however, Moessner may be criticized on the point that this book does not cover a wide field of eME syntax, as the title would seem to suggest. She leaves the following important topics untouched: gender of noun, reflexive pronouns and reflexive constructions, interrogative pronouns and interrogative sentences, usage of weak and strong adjectives, existential sentences, usage concerning tense, usage concerning mood, gerund, and element order in clauses.

Despite these shortcomings, from the foregoing discussion it is evident
that the author succeeds in suggesting a new direction for historical research on the English language. Because her main concern is the application of the linguistic theory of Axiomatic Functionalism to syntactic phenomena observed in eME texts, the book is not designed to be a comprehensive study on eME syntax. Therefore it is concluded that this ambitious work, even considering all its merits, can not replace Mustanoja's *A Middle English Syntax*.

**References**

(Works listed by Moessner have been excluded from this bibliography.)


Susan Ehrlich: *Point of View: A Linguistic Analysis of Literary Style*  