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## ALIGNMENT CHANGE IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH: INDO-EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES

### **Abstract**

Some features of English grammar can be considered peculiar when compared with other Indo-European (IE) languages. Although these languages share the same ancestors, a varying degree of change over a period of time made English peculiar. In this paper, an attempt is made to clarify this historical developmental path. A particular focus is put on the alignment, and how its change affects the overall structure of grammar in IE languages. What differentiates English from other IE languages is the higher degree of adaptation of accusative alignment, including syntactic transitivity, a change that has not occurred in other IE languages.

### **1. Introduction**

The English grammar possesses numerous oddities or peculiarities. They may not be so obvious when English is linguistically analysed on its own. However, they become apparent once it is examined in comparison with other Indo-European (IE) languages. What can make English grammar so peculiar? This is the question investigated in this paper. What is important in this study is comparative analysis, but it should also be mentioned that the main analysis is diachronic. An attempt is made to locate the origin of peculiarities in the course of its historical development from the ancestral language of all IE languages, i.e. Proto-Indo-European (PIE). It is believed to have been spoken ca. 6,000 years ago and this is the time span covered in this paper. Various grammatical features can be analysed in order to pinpoint the origin of peculiarities, and they in turn are examined in relation to alignment change. Alignment has not been given its deserved attention in studies of English grammar, both synchronic and diachronic, and it will prove to be a deciding factor in the historical change of English.

This paper is organised as follows: different alignment types are presented first, focusing on various features associated with active alignment. Once the basic

features are laid out, we concentrate on the history of English. We start this by re-evaluating the history of English in comparison with other IE languages. Then we point out peculiarities of Present-day English (PDE), which is radically different from its ancestor, Old English (OE). Finally, we examine where these peculiarities come from in terms of the alignment change.

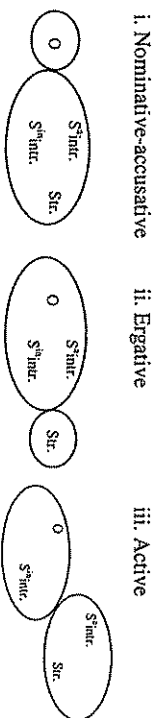
2. Alignment

The term alignment means any one of several grammatical systems for classifying noun phrase arguments in the sentences of a language, i.e. the pattern of treatment of subjects and direct objects, referring to the distribution of morphological markers or of syntactic, semantic or morphological characteristics. Perhaps the most commonly known classification of languages is nominative-ergative alignment (henceforth ergative alignment). The difference between them is that the subjects in transitive and intransitive construction are treated identically in accusative alignment, while the subject in intransitive construction and the direct object in transitive construction are identical in ergative alignment. There is yet another less known type of alignment, i.e. active alignment (henceforth active alignment). This alignment splits intransitive subjects into two groups, often the active-cum-pseudo-transitive subject and the stative/inactive-cum-transitive object. Each type is illustrated in (1) to (3). Notice the difference in the pronominal forms. In addition to these samples, each type is also schematically represented in Figure 1.

- Accusative alignment
- (1) a. *I punched him in the stomach.* (Transitive)
  - b. *He punched me in the stomach.* (Transitive)
  - c. *I run.* (Intransitive)
- Active alignment
- (2) a. *Cingallina-a-nga*  
greet.PST-3SG-1SG  
'He greeted me.' (Transitive)
  - b. *Ayallnu-nga*  
travel.PST-1SG  
I travelled.' (Intransitive)
  - c. *Ayallnu-g*  
travel-PST-3SG  
'He travelled.' (Intransitive)

- Lakota (Siouan, upper Midwestern United States, active alignment)
- (3) a. *wa-0-kékte*  
1SG-3SG-kill  
'I kill him.' (Transitive)
  - b. *0-ma-kékte*  
3SG-1SG-kill  
'He kills me.' (Transitive)
  - c. *wa-škate*  
1SG-play  
'I play.' (Dynamic intransitive)
  - d. *ma-'e'*  
1SG-die  
'I die.' (Stative intransitive)

Figure 1. Schematic representation of alignment system



Keys: Str. = transitive subject; O = transitive object;  
 S<sup>intr.</sup> = active/dynamic intransitive subject;  
 S<sup>intr.</sup> = inactive/stative intransitive subject

3. Characteristics of active alignment

Researchers might be familiar with accusative and ergative alignment, but active alignment is not as well known. Active alignment seems to possess specific characteristics, as summarised in (4) to (6), based on Klimov (1977: chapter 3, as summarised in Nichols 1992: 9-10). Nichols (1992: 9-10) considers these features as distinctive, interesting, and testable properties, but warns us that Klimov is familiar with languages of Eurasia. This familiarity may indicate that these features are more typical areal features of languages rather than pure typological comparison. So, various features in (4) to (6) are by no means meant to be definitions of active alignment. However, they show that there are common features for active alignment beyond the case marking, although some of them may possibly be a specific case for a particular language family.

- (4) Lexical properties:
- i. Binary division of nouns into active vs. inactive (often termed *animate* and *inanimate* in the literature).
  - ii. Binary division of verbs into active and inactive.
  - iii. Classificatory verbs or the like (classification based on shape, animacy, etc.).
  - iv. Active verbs require active nouns as subjects.
  - v. Singular-plural lexical suppletion in verbs.
  - vi. The category of number absent or weakly developed.
  - vii. No copula.
  - viii. "Adjectives" are actually intransitive verbs.
  - ix. Inclusive/exclusive pronoun distinction in first person.
  - x. No infinitive, no verbal nouns.
  - xi. Etymological identity of many body-part and plant-part terms (e.g. "ear" = "leaf").
  - xii. Doublet verbs, suppletive for animacy of actant.
- (5) Syntactic properties:
- i. The clause is structurally dominated by the verb.
  - ii. "Affective" (inverse) sentence construction with verbs of perception, etc.
  - iii. Syntactic categories of nearer and farther object rather than direct and indirect object.
  - iv. No *verba habendi*.
  - v. Word order usually SOV.
  - vi. Direct object incorporation into verb.
- (6) Morphological properties:
- i. The verb is much more richly inflected than the noun.
  - ii. Two series of personal affixes on the verb: active and inactive.
  - iii. Verbs have aspect rather than tense.
  - iv. The noun has possessive affixes.
  - v. Alienable-inalienable possession distinction.
  - vi. Inalienable possessive affixes and inactive verbal affixes are similar or identical.
  - vii. Third person often has zero affix.
  - viii. No voice opposition (since there is no transitivity opposition). Instead, there can be an opposition of what is called *version* in Kartvelian studies.
  - ix. Active verbs have more morphological variation or make more morphological distinctions than inactive verbs.
  - x. The morphological category of number is absent or weakly developed.

- xi. There are no noun cases for core grammatical relations (no nominative, accusative, genitive, dative). Sometimes there is an active/inactive case opposition.
- xii. Postpositions are often lacking or underdeveloped in these languages. Some of them have adpositions inflected like nouns.

#### 4. Re-evaluation of the history of English

The three alignments in Figure 1 are known to alter among each other historically (Nichols 1992; Harris and Campbell 1995: 240-281). As for the IE languages, PIE is known to have had active alignment, as argued in Klimov (1974, 1977), Szemerényi (1980), Lehmann (1989, 1993: 213-217), Gamkrelidze and Ivanov (1995: 233-276). This alignment has changed into an accusative one as its daughter languages developed. The degree of changes varies from language to language, but traces of earlier PIE and its active alignment can, surprisingly, be found in modern IE languages. The grammar of PDE is undoubtedly based on accusative alignment, but OE seems to preserve some aspects of earlier active alignment. It is argued here that the earlier active characteristics in OE are relics of PIE, and the changes from OE to PDE are much more rapid than changes during the same period in other IE languages. Some changes, observable in English during different periods in comparison with other IE languages, are summarised in Table 1, which is based on a selection of older IE languages.

Table 1 illustrates a distributional pattern of certain grammatical constructions in OE, Old Church Slavonic, Latin and Old Irish. The grammatical structures of these languages are more uniform, and yet some differences can be observed, i.e. the presence or absence of the middle voice (constructions expressing spontaneous events including the reflexive). OE and Old Irish are quite similar in terms of these structures at this stage.

Table 1. Older IE languages (ca. 1,500 to 2,000 years ago)

	OE	Old Church Slavic	Latin	Old Irish
Agreement	✓	✓	✓	✓
Case	✓	✓	✓	✓
Impersonal verbs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Passive voice	×	×	×	×
Middle voice	×	✓	✓	×
Word order	SOV	SOV	SOV	SOV
Tense-aspect	<i>be</i> -perfect	<i>be</i> -perfect	<i>be</i> -perfect	<i>be</i> -perfect
Labile verbs	×	×	×	×

The differences shown in Table 1 become more obvious in their daughter languages, as illustrated in Table 2. English has lost impersonal verbs and agreement, since it does not mark the gender and number of modifiers. However, some new structures such as labile verbs have emerged. OE and Old Irish look similar in structure, but there are some clear differences between English and Irish, i.e. agreement, word order and tense-aspect.

Table 2. Modern IE languages

	English	Serbian	French	Irish
Agreement	×	✓	✓	✓
Case	×	✓	×	×
Impersonal verbs	×	✓	✓	×
Passive voice	✓	(✓)	✓	✓
Middle voice	×	✓	✓	×
Word order	SVO	SOV/SVO	SVO	VSO
Tense-aspect	<i>have</i> -perfect	<i>be</i> -perfect*	<i>have/be</i> -perfect**	<i>be</i> -perfect*
Labile verbs	✓	×	×	✓

Keys: ( ) = only possible in West and East Slavic; \* = construction can form a split ergativity; \*\* = *be*-perfect is formed only with mutative verbs.

### 5. Peculiarities of PDE

The results shown in Table 2 might make one think that the structure of English represents other Germanic languages. This proves to be false, and other Germanic languages are much more similar to other IE languages. Table 3 illustrates the distribution of structures according to a division into East, West and North Germanic. East Germanic consists only of Gothic, which died out by the eighth century. The rest consists of the modern languages, such as Icelandic, Norwegian, Dutch, etc. Various structures in Table 3 clearly show that English is an odd-one-out among Germanic languages. Some Germanic languages still preserve agreement and case marking, the word order is verb second (V-2), and the passive voice has not developed much, except in cases of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish. Note, however, that in these languages, the passive is derived from the middle voice (i.e. (7)), where the suffix *-s* can be a marker for the passive, middle and reflexive), not the periphrastic aspectual construction as in English. Perfective aspect is expressed periphrastically, but the auxiliaries are often normally both *be* (for mutative verbs) and *have* (for the rest).

Table 3. Germanic languages

	English	East Germanic	West Germanic	North Germanic
Agreement	×	✓	(✓)	(✓)
Case	×	✓	(✓)	(✓)
Impersonal verbs	×	✓	✓	×
Passive voice	✓	×	×	✓*
Middle voice	×	✓	✓	×
Word order	SVO	SOV	V-2	V-2
Tense-aspect	<i>have</i> -perfect	<i>be</i> -perfect	<i>have/be</i> -perfect**	<i>have/be</i> -perfect**
Labile verbs	✓	×	×	✓

Keys: ( ) = only applicable to Icelandic, Faroese (North Germanic) and German (West Germanic); \* = only possible in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish; \*\* = *be*-perfect is formed only with mutative verbs.

- Danish
- (7) a. *Døren åbned-es af en tjener*  
 door:DEF open-s by a servant  
 'The door is opened by a servant.' (Passive)
- b. *Jag har længe-s efter dig*  
 I have longed-s after you  
 'I have been longing for you.' (Middle)
- c. *Vi har mødt-s flere gange*  
 we have meet-s several times  
 'We have met each other several times.' (Reciprocal)

The difference listed in Table 3 can be best explained in terms of the archaicism of West and North Germanic, i.e. these languages have not changed as much as English has. There are two key features for archaicism, and the first is word order. The word order in the main clause and the subordinate clause sometimes differ, e.g. German has an SVO order in the main clause, but an SOV order in the subordinate clause (i.e. (8)). This was also the case in OE (i.e. (9)). The order in the subordinate clause is often considered an archaic order preserved only in specific environment (Givón 1979: 83ff). The German SOV order in the subordinate clause is a relic of earlier word order.

- German
- (8) a. *Hans schreibt einen Brief*  
 Hans write.PRS.3SG a letter  
 'Hans writes a letter.'
- b. *Wir wissen, daß Hans einen Brief schreibt*  
 we know.PRS.1PL that Hans a letter write.RS.3SG  
 'We know that Hans writes a letter.'
- OE
- (9) *þa com þær gan in to me heofoncund Wisdom, & þær*  
 then came there going in to me heavenly Wisdom and that  
*min mornede mod mid his wordum gegrette*  
 my sad spirit with his words greeted  
 'Then heavenly Wisdom came to me there and greeted my sad spirit with his word.' (Bo 3.8.15)

Another feature is the nominal gender. When languages have a ternary gender distinction into masculine, feminine and neuter, some neuter nouns involve 'unnatural' referents, such as child or girl (Silverstein 1985: 229) – unnatural, since these referents are animate and should be given either masculine or feminine

gender. It has been claimed that the accusative *-m* marking was created in order to differentiate the doer of action from the recipient of action. This normally happens with masculine and feminine nouns, but not with neuters. Neuter nouns normally have the *-m* ending for both nominative and accusative. This is clearly shown in Table 4 from Latin. In a number of IE languages, a word for child or girl is often neuter, e.g. German, Serbian, Konkani (Indic), etc. This is related to the productivity, derived from the PIE nominal distinction between active and inactive nouns. The former entails animate nouns, i.e. referents are alive, and some inanimate ones which are metaphorically considered as animate and the latter, inanimate nouns, which lack life cycles (Gankreidze and Ivanov 1995: 238-239). For example, 'water' in PIE can be considered as animate \**H<sub>2</sub>O* 'water, river, stream (as a moving element)' and inanimate *wot'orr<sup>h</sup>* 'water (as a non-living element)'. Another case is the classification of trees. The names of trees are often active, since they can bear fruits (a sign of productivity), while its fruits are inanimate, e.g. Latin *pirus* 'pear tree', *malus* 'apple tree' (animate), while *pirum* 'pear', *malum* 'apple' (as a fruit, inanimate) (cf. Meillet 1948: I 211-229). The consideration of *girl* grammatically as neuter is related to the case of the names of trees and their fruits, and this can be considered as a relic of an earlier grammatical structure.

Table 4. Latin case paradigm

SG	<i>dominus</i> 'master' (masculine)	<i>domina</i> 'mistress' (feminine)	<i>bellum</i> 'war' (neuter)
Nominative	<i>dominus</i>	<i>domina</i>	<i>bellum</i>
Vocative	<i>domine</i>	<i>domina</i>	<i>bellum</i>
Accusative	<i>dominum</i>	<i>dominam</i>	<i>bellum</i>
Genitive	<i>domini</i>	<i>dominae</i>	<i>belli</i>
Dative	<i>domino</i>	<i>dominae</i>	<i>bello</i>
Ablative	<i>domino</i>	<i>domina</i>	<i>bello</i>

Apart from word order and grammatical gender, there is a clear difference between OE and PDE in the features listed in (4) to (6). This is summarised in Table 5. For instance, consider the feature (4)vi: OE had a very poor distinction between countable and mass nouns. This is partly due to the lack of classifiers, such as *a glass of*, *a pile of*, *a bunch of*, etc. They became more frequently used after

the Norman Conquest and during Middle English (1350-1500) to Early Modern English (1500-1700), as shown in Table 6. A possible example in OE is *sester*. One earlier example is shown in (10). Nevertheless, OE contained more features closely associated with active alignment, and this is clearly shown. Considering all these features, it is plausible to consider that OE still preserved some features of active alignment, which is why its grammar was so different from that of PDE.

Table 5. Difference in presence of active alignment features in OE and PDE

Period	Features
OE	8 ((4i); (4vi); (5i); (5ii); (5v); (6iv); (6vii); (6viii))
PDE	2 ((5i); (6ii))

Table 6. Appearance of measurement classifiers

Before 1350	1350-1500	1500-1700	1700-1900	Total
1 (5.0%)	7 (35.0%)	9 (45.0%)	3 (15.0%)	20 (100%)
<i>sester</i>	<i>an ear of;</i> <i>a grain of;</i> <i>a loaf of;</i> <i>a piece of;</i> <i>a sheet of;</i> <i>a slice of;</i> <i>a strip of;</i>	<i>a block of;</i> <i>a blade of;</i> <i>a bunch of;</i> <i>a cake of;</i> <i>a cut of;</i> <i>a lot of;</i> <i>a speck of;</i> <i>a stick of;</i> <i>a suit of;</i>	<i>an article of;</i> <i>a bit of;</i> <i>a drop of;</i>	

- (10) *Nim* *arme* *sester* *wines* &  
 take:IMP.SG. one.ACC.SG sester.ACC.SG wine.GEN.SG and  
*twegen* *waters*  
 two.ACC.SG water.GEN.SG  
 'Take one sester of wine and two sesters of water.' (*Quadrupedibus* 151)

## 6. Changes in Indo-European languages in terms of alignment

So far, we have seen various changes that all seem to be somehow related to alignment change from the active to the accusative. What is involved in this change is a shift of the basic operation system in grammar from aspect-based to transitivity-based (Lehmann 2002). So it is possible to claim that a major part in the history of English can be considered a development of transitivity. Transitivity is normally defined as a transfer of energy from actor to undergoer. However, there seem to be two different sub-types of transitivity, i.e. semantic and syntactic transitivity. Semantic transitivity assumes the transfer in a gradience. The transfer can be high, low or even intermediate, i.e. some sentences are more transitive than others, and some ambiguous cases can be found (Hopper and Thompson 1980; Taylor 2003: 222-246). When it comes to syntactic transitivity, one should be able to tell whether a sentence is transitive or not, mainly by the presence/absence of the direct object, leaving very little grey area.

Historically speaking, semantic transitivity emerged earlier and syntactic transitivity later. Semantic transitivity takes advantage of case marking in order to create different degrees of transfer, such as marking the direct object with accusative, dative or locative case. This kind of subtle difference cannot be expressed in syntactic transitivity. So the presence of case marking seems to indicate the presence of semantic transitivity. The transitivity type in PDE is indeed a syntactic one, but there is another way to judge the type, which is the passive voice. For instance, when a lexical verb is transitive, such as a verb of creation or destruction, the passivisation is more easily achieved. Kittilä (2002: 23) rightly points out this correlation of the passive and transitivity as follows:

Passivization makes it in many (but not all) cases possible to separate transitive clauses from less transitive ones, since ... only clauses conceived of as somehow transitive are to be passivized in many languages. The acceptability of passivization correlates to some extent with transitivity: the more transitive a clause is, the more readily it can be passivised.

This makes the passivisation of perception verbs difficult, since the transitivity is not high in this construction due to the spontaneity of event and the lack of volitionality of the actor. In PDE, perception verbs can be passivised, although some instances still create contextual anomaly, e.g. *?This book is liked by him*. However, these verbs are much more easily passivisable than those in other Germanic languages. This is so, since the presence of the direct object has become a condition for passivisation in English. This can also be considered a sign that syntactic transitivity has emerged in English.

Table 7 and Table 8 illustrate the change in transitivity. Earlier transitivity is semantic-based in all IE languages, while their daughter languages show diversity.

Some languages still preserve a semantic-based type (i.e. Slavic languages), and others are better considered intermediate (i.e. German). English has developed a highly syntactically-oriented transitivity type. In conjunction with the changes of active alignment features in Table 5, this development is perhaps the major influence behind making English the most peculiar language within Indo-European languages.

Table 7. Transitivity type in older IE languages

	OE	OHG	Latin	OCS	Old
Semantic	√	√	√	√	√
Intermediate					
Syntactic					

Notes: OE = Old English; OHG = Old High German; Old Rus = Old Russian; OCS = Old Church Slavonic; Old Lit = Old Lithuanian; Old Ir = Old Irish

Table 8. Transitivity type in modern IE languages

	English	German	French	Serbian	Irish
Semantic				√	
Intermediate		√			
Syntactic	√		√		√

## 7. Conclusion

Alignment change in IE languages from active to accusative helps us to understand the diversity in grammar. This holds a key to understanding how English has changed. OE still preserved some relics of active alignment, which are derivable from PIE (see Table 5). In forming PDE, English has lost most of these features, but some IE languages still preserve older structures. This is what makes the PDE grammar look peculiar when compared to other IE languages.

Changes in alignment from active to accusative means that transitivity has emerged in the grammar of IE languages, but there is a varying degree of development from semantic to syntactic transitivity. English has turned into the syntactic one, but a number of other IE languages have not reached the same stage

yet. This can be shown in the passivisation process, especially the passivizability of perception verbs in English. The peculiarities of PDE grammar can be attributed to the alignment change and to the emergence of syntactic transitivity. This feature has not been noticed before, but the understanding of this will surely make the explanation of historical changes in English much easier and more systematic.

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