

Locative Inversion in the History of English: a spoonful of innovation and a pinch of continuity

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Background: The matrix phenomenon Locative Inversion (LI) (1) is remarkable in Present Day English (PDE) because the verb and subject invert, resembling historical Verb Second (V2) distributions (2), yet PDE is otherwise strictly SVO. LI typically involve the preposing of a topic-like spatio-deictic argument (the locative), an unaccusative verb, and a late full DP subject. However, such inversion is unremarkable in a V2 system.

(1) [*Out of the water*] [*emerged*] a crocodile.

PDE

(2) [*And longe tyme after*] [*come*] *Cadwalayn azeyne fram Irlande ...*

Middle English

And long time after came Cadwalayn back from Ireland

c. 1400

‘And a long time after Cadwalayn came back from Ireland’ (CMBRUT3-M3,101.3035)

From a discourse perspective, LI is tied to broad focus (also wide/presentational), i.e., both the verb and DP subject fall within the focus domain; the entire event is presented as new, versus a single constituent under narrow focus. The preposed locative can be understood as the Subject of Predication (SoP) (cf. Cardinaletti 2004), a topic-like discourse category in that it shares an [+aboutness] specification, but it does not require d-linking characteristic of given topics, e.g., familiar and aboutness topics (cf. Rizzi 2005, 2018; Bentley & Cruschina 2018; Sluckin et al. 2021; Sluckin 2021). From a synchronic syntactic perspective, I adopt an analysis that the locative targets a position in the C-domain directly. Specifically, a discourse related {uδ} feature on C (cf. Miyagawa 2017) specified for SoP (Sluckin 2021) is valued by a {iδ_{SoP}}-bearing preposed locative when the subject DP remains in the focus domain; in canonical SV clauses, {uδ_{SoP}} on C is valued locally by the subject DP in Spec,TP. In LI, T’s D/φ-related EPP is satisfied by a silent expletive-like argument (Coopmans 1989; Postal 2004; Bruening 2010, 2021; Sluckin 2021), giving rise to a reported matrix-embedded asymmetry. Explicitly, this argument is a silent logophoric event-bound argument (cf. Sluckin 2021) which grounds the narrative centre (cf. Laparle 2020).

(3) [_{CP}[XP_{LOC}{iδ_{SoP}}*In the cave*]_j][C_{{uδ_{SoP}}}][TP_{pro}_{exp}{iD,iφ}][T_{uD,uφ}][VP v_{appeared}[_SC][DP*Esmerelda*][XP_j]]

Problem: LI has on the one hand been claimed to be a remnant of the V2 syntax (Brinton & Stein 1995; Mohr 2005), i.e., the V-to-C movement present in Old English (OE) and Middle English (ME). LI is, however, demonstrably not a case of residual V2 (cf. Rizzi 1996), as the subject may never intervene between an auxiliary and lexical infinitive (4a). Instead, the subject must occur finally, apparently as the internal argument of either a pure unaccusative or an unergative verb coerced as such (Roberts 2010, Sluckin 2021) (4b). This also shows that LI does not behave like expletive structures, which superficially allows a V2 like order, e.g., *there was a boy sitting in the room* (Deal 2009).

(4) a. **In the corner was a boy sitting.* Vs b. *In the corner was sitting a boy.*

Some scholars have claimed that LI emerged in Early Modern English (EModE) (Brinton & Stein 1995; Haeberli 1999; Sluckin 2016). However, simply because LI is recognisable as a construction from the 16th century does not entail that it was absent beforehand. V2 may have simply obscured LI; For example, Dutch shows a TP-domain LI-like distribution, orthogonal to its V2 system (Zwart 1992; Bresnan 1994), where movement of a locative XP to or through Spec,TP bleeds the locative-derived expletive *er*; this type of LI is different to English LI. Thus, while PDE LI does not reflect V2 syntax, three diachronic scenarios are imaginable for how LI came to be.

- (i) LI was actuated *ex-nihilo* out of the loss of Middle English V2 system
- (ii) LI in its current constellation was in fact hidden in plain sight but obscured by V2

- (iii) The feature constellation necessary for LI was always present but underwent redistribution from a constellation giving rise to a pre-existing LI structure lead to the constellation involved in the modern construction.

Methodology: This paper presents a large qualitative and quantitative corpus study making use of the YCOE (Taylor et al. 2003) and PPCHE (Kroch et al. 2000 et seq.) corpora with over 1000 years of data from Old English through to Modern British English, i.e., from c.850 AD to c.1915. The study furthermore controls for heavy vs light subjects, as very heavy subjects are known to facilitate LI-like inversions which do not follow the same set of argument-structural constraints (Culicover & Levine 2001); preposed temporal adverbs, locative adverbs, and PPs; negation which is ruled out in LI; and those periphrastic structures incompatible with modern LI, e.g., present perfect, do-support and certain modals. Data from V2 stages of English is also contrasted with LI patterns in V2 Dutch to understand if a different type of LI compatible with V2 was present.

Results: The data confirm that PDE-like LI was indeed first distinguishable from Early Modern English; not only does LI stand out as a special inversion structure from this point, but preposed temporal adverbs decrease significantly in intransitive inversion structures. Nonetheless, strikingly, structures resembling LI resisted the loss of inversions tied to the loss of V2 in Middle English (c.1450) (see also Warner 2007), remaining stable many decades longer (c.1525) than those in the uncontrolled samples or samples with explicitly LI-incompatible features; in line with findings by (Warner 2007) that unaccusative inversions held on for longer. This evidence suggests that modern LI co-existed with superficially similar V2 inversions as early as Middle English. Furthermore, neither Old nor Middle English show consistent Dutch-style constraints on LI; unlike Dutch, a preposed locative XP and TP expletive *paer* ‘there’ could optionally co-occur in unaccusative/impersonal contexts, while the expletive was simply optional in LI-like structures with a fronted temporal adverb and not obligatory as it is in Dutch. Finally, it is notable that the set of possible embedded topicalisations in Old English are limited to lexical items describable as Subjects of Predication according to Cardinaletti (2004), e.g., locative XPs with unaccusatives, non-nominative experiencers of psych verbs, and promoted subjects of unaccusative and passive structures (cf. Pintzuk 1993, 1999; Allen 1995; van Kemenade 1997; Fischer 2010; among others). However, embedded topicalization of object DPs of transitives or other types of embedded V2 are generally unavailable (Walkden & Salvesen 2017).

Proposal: In OE, T hosted $\{u\delta_{\text{SoP}}\}$ which could be valued by locative adverbs, spatio-deictic PPs, and oblique subjects when a nominative external argument was absent. In short, embedded preposing was conditioned by discourse and argument structure in OE, mirroring Romance null-subject languages (cf. Sluckin 2021). Furthermore, I hypothesise that $\{u\delta_{\text{SoP}}\}$ migrated from T to C during the ME period as structures giving unambiguous evidence for SoP on T were lost in two main stages: **Stage 1:** the loss of dative experiencers and impersonal verbs in ME leading to a greater number of EPP-satisfying nominative subjects, which limited evidence for $\{u\delta_{\text{SoP}}\}$ on T to only fronted spatio-deictic adverbials/arguments, while all other preposed XPs fronted to Spec,CP; **Stage 2:** The development of a strong-subject related EPP for $\{uD, u\varphi\}$ on T (Kroch & Taylor 1997; Fuß 2003, 2008; among others) coinciding with the rise of overt expletive *there* in the 13th to 15th centuries. The result was that evidence for $\{u\delta_{\text{SoP}}\}$ on T was simply too opaque for acquisition and was fully reanalysed as a feature of C in line with all other discourse-driven fronting operations by EModE at the latest, although probably during ME given the resistance found to the loss of V2.