The objectives of this talk are three-fold: 1) to describe the observed variation in the position of objects in Old English (OE) and Middle English (ME); 2) to present the factors that we have found to have a significant effect on object position; 3) to explore the relationship between the patterns of variation and possible Information Structure (IS) effects.

We have shown in previous work (e.g. Pintzuk and Taylor 2006) that objects can occur both preverbally and postverbally in earlier stages of English, and we have used multivariate analysis to assess the significance and strength of (some of) the factors that influence this variation. These factors include length, clause type, date of composition, case/function, and object type (positive, negative, quantified). In this talk, we will focus on only three of the factors: length, object type and change over time.

1) Length
It is generally assumed that there is a correlation between short/light constituents and given information and long/heavy constituents and new information; thus what appears as a length effect is actually a reflex of information structure. Although we haven’t tested this correlation ourselves, the Old and Middle English data certainly shows the expected distribution of objects by length that this correlation predicts: that is, the lighter the object, the more likely it is to appear preverbally and thus early in the clause; the heavier the object, the more likely it is to appear postverbally and thus later in the clause. This effect is constant over time and across object types.

2) Object type
The three object types -- positive, quantified, negative -- show a constant frequency difference in their position: the frequency of preverbal negative objects is greater than the frequency of quantified objects, which in turn is greater than the frequency of positive objects, in all time periods. In addition, there are constraints which affect the three types differently: for example, negative objects do not postpose, positive objects do not prepose, and quantified objects can move either rightward or leftward. The categorical nature of some of these constraints seems to suggest a syntactic explanation, at least in part. Is there an IS constraint that would apply differentially based on the type the object?

3) Change over time
The frequency of preverbal objects in general gradually decreases over time until the last remnants of OV order finally disappear around 1500. Each type of object, however, shows its own pattern of change, with different rates of loss and a different terminal date. This suggests that the processes affecting the different types of objects, whether syntactic or IS, are, in fact, different. What causes the gradual loss of preverbal position for objects? Can the loss be correlated with changes in IS over time?

References: