The Person-Case Constraint in Old English

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Summary

In this poster I investigate whether the Person-Case Constraint (PCC; Bonet 1991, 1994) holds in Old English. The PCC is a restriction on the co-occurrence of weak person markers that has been cross-linguistically widely observed. It comes in two flavours, strong and weak. There are clear counterexamples to the strong PCC in OE. Whether the weak PCC holds is less clear.

The Person-Case Constraint

Strong PCC (Basque, French, Greek, Kiowa, ...): In a combination of a weak direct object and an indirect object [clitic, agreement marker, weak pronoun], *the direct object has to be 3rd person.*

1. Agnès me/te le/la présentera
Agnès 1/2SG.IO 3SG.M/F.DO present.FUT.3SG
'Agnès will introduce him/her to me/you.'

2. Agnès le/la lui présentera
Agnès 3SG.M/F.DO 3SG.M/F.IO present.FUT.3SG
'Agnès will introduce him/her to him/her.'

3. *Agnès me/te lui présentera
Agnès 3SG.M/F.DO 3SG.M/F.IO present.FUT.3SG
'Agnès will introduce me/you to him/her.'

4. *Agnès me/te me/te présentera
Agnès 1/2SG.DO/IO 1/2SG.DO/IO present.FUT.3SG
'Agnès will introduce me/you to me/you.'

Weak PCC (Catalan, Spanish, Italian, ...): In a combination of a weak direct object and an indirect object, *if there is a 3rd person it has to be the direct object.* (Bonet 1991: 182; Anagnostopoulou 2008: 15–16).

Rules out equivalent of (3) above, but allows equivalent of (4) above:

5. Te m' ha venut el mercader més important.
2SG.IO 1SG.DO has sold the merchant most important
'The most important merchant has sold you to me.' (Bonet 1991: 41)

The PCC can't be explained purely semantically; there's nothing wrong with thoughts like those expressed by (3) and (4), and some languages appear at first sight not to have the PCC at all, e.g. varieties of present-day English.

6. You were going to give them me.
(Buffy, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, season 2 episode 7 'Lie to Me')

The PCC in Germanic: previous research

The usual view: continental Germanic doesn't seem to have any PCC restrictions (for German and Dutch, Cardinaletti 1999: 65; Haspelmath 2004).

1. weil er mich ihm gestern nicht vorgestellt hat
because he 1SG.DO 3SG.M.IO yesterday not introduced has
'because he did not introduce me to him yesterday' (German)

2. Ze stelden me 'm / ? 'm me voor
they introduced 1SG.DO 3SG.M.IO / 3SG.M.IO 1SG.DO PRT
'they introduced me to him' (Dutch)

But Bonet (1991) shows the PCC to be operative in Swiss German & English:

3. *They showed her me
((Standard Southern British) English)

4. D' Maria zeigt em mich
the Maria shows 3SG.M.IO 1SG.DO
'Mary shows him to me' (Swiss German; cf. Werner 1999)

Anagnostopoulou (2008) gives an overview of PCC effects in Germanic, particularly in German. She demonstrates weak PCC effects with pronouns occupying the Wackernagel position (immediately after C⁰) in German (*pace* Haspelmath 2004).

5. *weil dich ihm irgendwer vorgestellt hat
because 2SG.DO 3SG.M.IO someone-NOM introduced has
'because someone has introduced you to him'

6. ??weil mich ihr irgendwer vorgestellt hat
because 2SG.DO 3SG.F.IO someone-NOM introduced has
'because someone has introduced me to her'

This correlates with a requirement for DOs to precede IOs in Wackernagel position. PCC effects only arise when the subject follows the DO and IO pronouns.

Anagnostopoulou (2008: 27–28) finds similar situations in Dutch and Swedish. Judgements are, in general, less stable and robust and more prone to variation than in clitic languages.

The PCC in Old English: methods

Old English: a West Germanic language for which our records date from the 8th to the 11th centuries, which bears many syntactic similarities to the present-day continental West Germanic languages. Most texts are in West Saxon dialect. 1.5-million-word syntactically parsed corpus available (Taylor et al. 2003).

Do PCC effects exist in Old English? And if so, weak or strong?

Method: search of the YCOE corpus (Taylor et al. 2003) using CorpusSearch 2 (Randall 2005–2007). Search targeted all clusters of IO and DO pronouns (in either order, and not only in Wackernagel position). Results were then analysed by hand for person and number and to exclude a number of false positives (for instance, pronouns adjacent across clause boundaries).
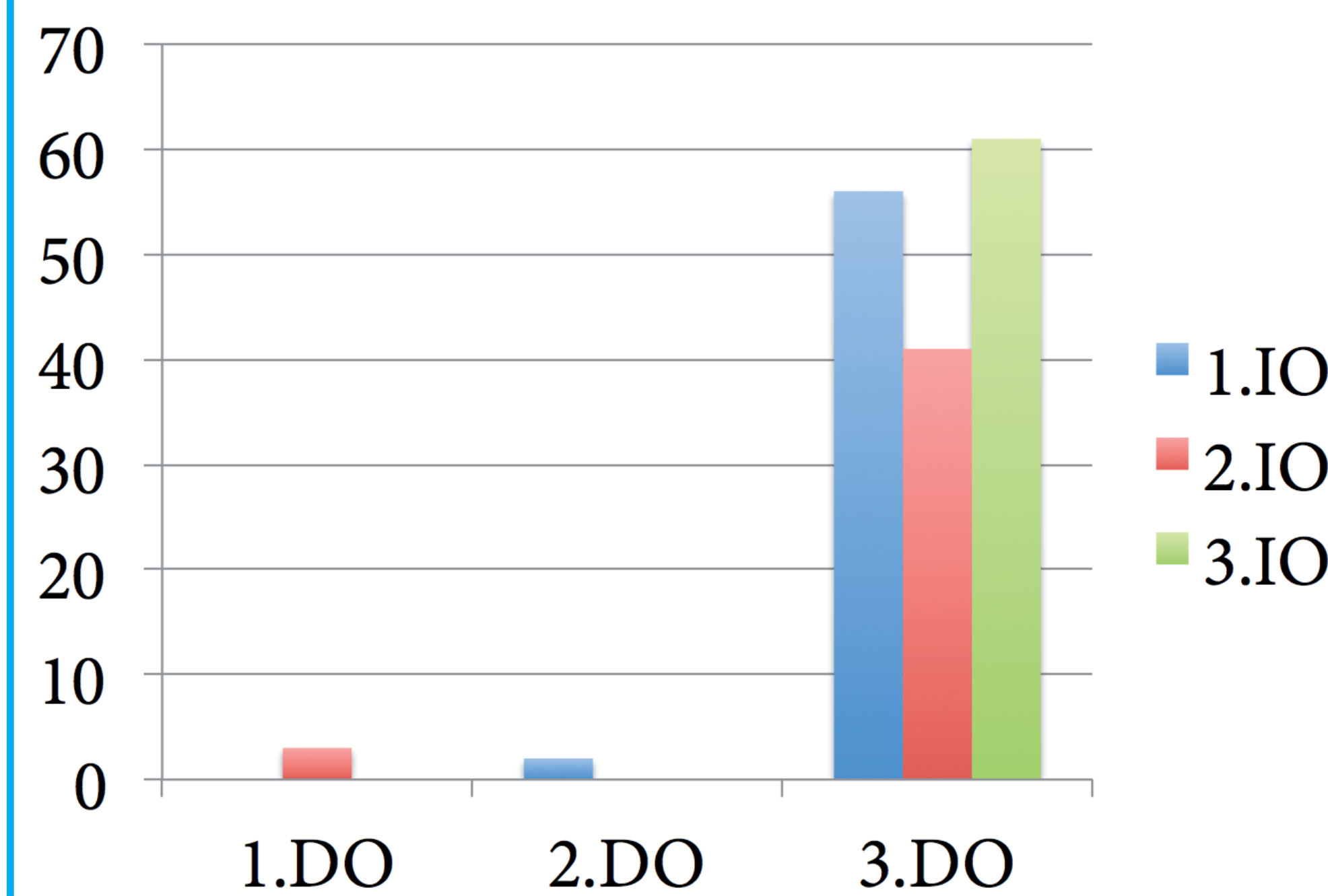
```
node: $ROOT

query:
([1]NP|NP-ACC|NP-DAT iDoms [2]PRO|PRO^A|PRO^D) AND
([3]NP|NP-ACC|NP-DAT iDoms [4]PRO|PRO^A|PRO^D) AND
([1]NP|NP-ACC|NP-DAT iPrecedes [3]NP|NP-ACC|NP-DAT)
```
Raw number of hits in corpus: 212.

The PCC in Old English: quantitative results

		Accusative			Total
		1st	2nd	3rd	
Dative	1st	0	2	56	58
	2nd	3	0	41	44
	3rd	0	0	61	61
Total		3	2	158	163

Counterexamples to the strong PCC

The strong PCC would predict no examples in the top left four cells of the table, i.e. no examples involving local direct objects. There are five counterexamples to this.

1. þa þe me þe sealdon
those that 1SG.DO 2SG.IO gave
'those who gave me to you'
(coverhom,HomS_24_[ScraggVerc_1]:176.186)

2. ne þinne Drihten þe me þe sealde
nor your god that 1SG.DO 2SG.IO gave
'nor your god who gave me to you'
(coverhom,HomU_9_[ScraggVerc_4]:283.783)

3. se þe me sealde
he that 1SG.DO 2SG.IO gave
'he who gave me to you'
(cowsgosp,Jn_[WSCp]:19.11.7303)

4. God me on geweald sealde
God 2SG.DO 1SG.IO in power gave
'God gave you into my power' (cogregdC,GD_1_[C]:3.25.4.263)

5. & for ðam hider þe me to cwalme brohton
and for that hither 2SG.DO 1SG.IO to death.DAT brought
'and for that reason (they) brought you hither to me for death'
(coverhom,HomS_24_[ScraggVerc_1]:106.115)

There are only five of these, but they are from different texts and periods (*Vercelli Homilies, Gregory's Dialogues, West Saxon Gospels*), so are unlikely to be set phrases or authorial idiosyncrasies, and they involve two different verbs (*sellan, bringan*). The first three unambiguously involve the Wackernagel position, as they involve the relative complementizer þe, an uncontroversial C⁰ element.

It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that the strong PCC is not operative in Old English. (This is fine, since there's no theoretical or comparative reason to expect it to be.)

A counterexample to the weak PCC?
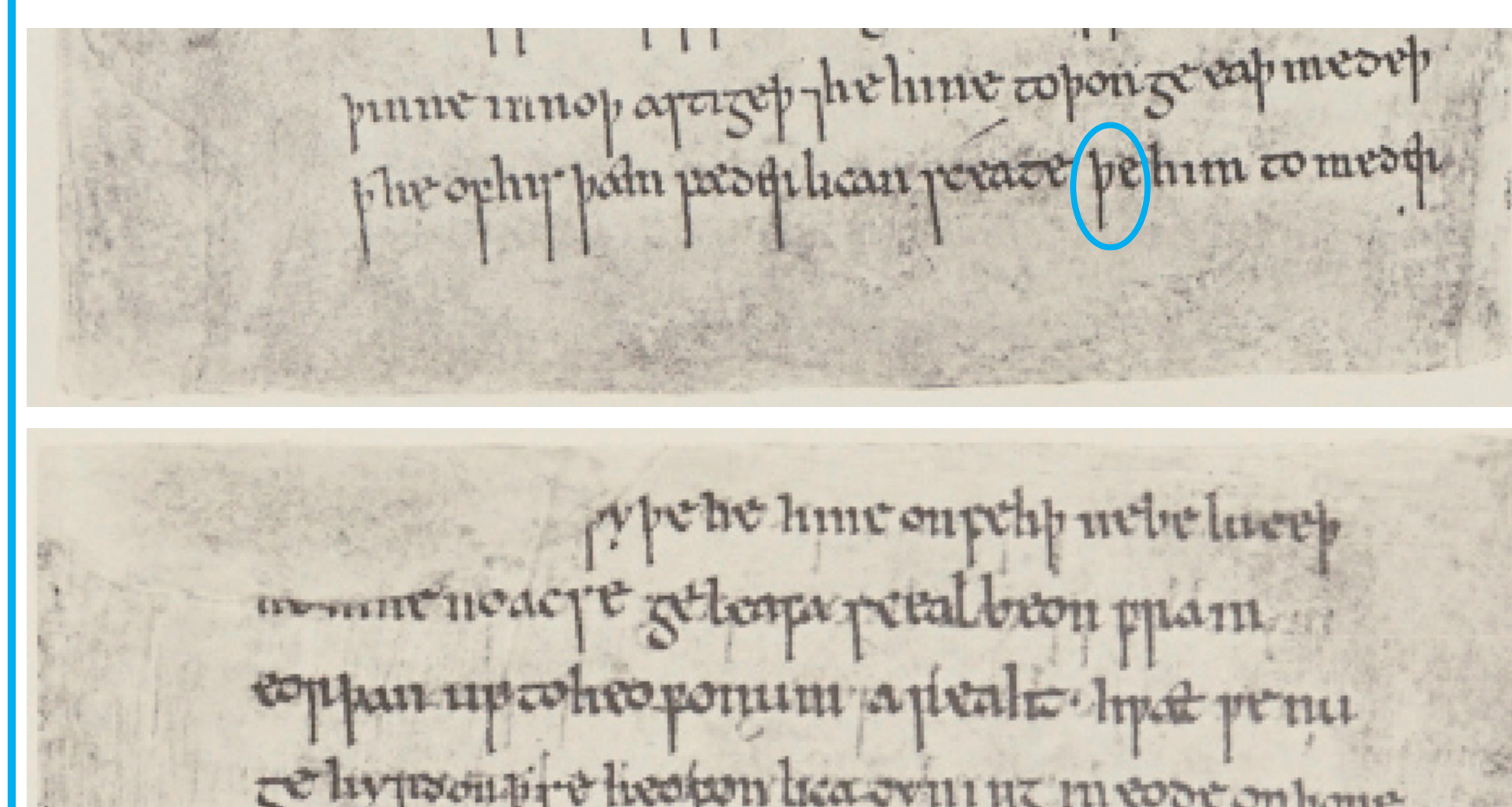
The weak PCC predicts that there should be no examples in the bottom left cells of the table. This is borne out, despite there being plenty of third-person indirect objects in two-pronoun clusters in general.

There is one potential counterexample, but I have excluded it from the quantitative results as it is highly dubious for multiple reasons.

1. þæt he of his þæm fæderlican sceate þe him to meder …
that he of his the.DAT fatherly bosom.DAT 2SG.DO 3SG.M.IO to mother
'that he, from his father's bosom, [chooses] you as his mother' (?)
(coblick,HomU_18_[BlHom_1]:5.29.33)

This example doesn't involve the Wackernagel position, as the subject precedes it. In addition, the manuscript is damaged at this point and the clause is left incomplete. In the YCOE, þe is tagged as a 2nd person pronoun (as it is analysed in editions), but it could just as easily be the relative complementizer (see examples in box above).

Below: the Blickling Homilies manuscript, end of folio 1v and start of folio 2r (from Willard 1960), with þe circled.

Discussion: meaningful or accidental gap?

Classic problem in historical syntax: no native speakers, and absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Can we be sure that the lack of counterexamples to the weak PCC is not accidental?

Complication: even in languages in which the PCC does not hold, there is, '[f]or obvious semantic reasons' (Haspelmath 2004: 33), a tendency for recipients to be animate ('virtually always') and for themes to be inanimate ('a strong tendency').

Sceptical excursus

Actually, I don't think these reasons are so obvious.
- It depends on the predicate. *Introduce*, for instance, is most natural with two animates, and *give* can quite happily take two inanimates, as in "gave the wall a fresh coat of paint".
- Haspelmath (2004: 35) only presents evidence from a corpus of German, the writings of Goethe (!). But as we've seen, the PCC actually does hold in German under some conditions, so Haspelmath's conclusion is vitiated.
- Inanimate is not the same as third person. (In languages with either version of the PCC, animacy plays no role in it.)

I'll grant the point in what follows, though.

So there are two possible hypotheses:
- Hypothesis 1: the weak PCC holds for OE.
- Hypothesis 2: weak-PCC-violating examples, rather than being ungrammatical, are accidentally unattested (perhaps because of their semantic unlikeliness).

Taking Hypothesis 2 to be the null hypothesis, and collapsing 1st and 2nd person together, a Fisher's exact test (Fisher 1922) gives p=0.1581, which is not significant. In other words, under Hypothesis 2, the probability of observing the results we find in the corpus (or more extreme results) by chance is 0.1581.

Discussion: the role of ordering

If the weak PCC can be said to hold in Old English, then this supports Anagnostopoulou's (2008: 29) generalization that the weak PCC with non-clitic pronouns is linked to strict ordering of direct and indirect pronominal objects:. Of the 163 examples, 159 displayed the order accusative-dative, and only 4 exhibited dative-accusative order. This is similar to modern German, in which the dative-accusative order is marginal (only possible with strong pronouns?).

Discussion: theoretical accounts

There are many competing accounts of the PCC in the literature. If OE is of the German type, we need a story that:
- can account for the weak PCC as well as the strong PCC (unlike e.g. Adger & Harbour 2007)
- doesn't place all the action in the morpho(phono)logy (Bonet 1994, Boeckx 2000), since the West Germanic PCC type seems to involve separate morphological words

The Agree-based accounts that work on the principle "Two Goals One Probe" (Béjar & Rezac 2003, Anagnostopoulou 2005, Nevins 2007) can capture this sort of behaviour, with something added to capture the Wackernagel position effect (Anagnostopoulou 2008).

Conclusion: the data are compatible with an analysis of Old English as exhibiting the weak PCC, but we can't be sure that this is not an accident. The strong PCC is ruled out.

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