VOSI CONSTRUCTION IN ENGLISH

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The accusative and infinitive construction is currently receiving a great deal of attention in both synchronic and diachronic studies. Synchronically, there is no consensus of opinion – especially for English, which allows quite a range of accusative and infinitive constructions – about the analysis of the construction after causatives, perception verbs, 'believe' and 'want' type verbs. In recent diachronic studies most attention seems to have been paid to the development of the accusative and infinitive in Latin, and relatively little to the construction in the history of English.

Most of the grammarians (Krickau (1877), Zeitlin (1908), Callaway (1931), Bock (1931), Visser (1973)) list all the different types of infinitive complement constructions under the term 'accusative and infinitive' construction (when an infinitive follows a phrase 'verb + substantive or pronoun in the accusative' the substantive and the infinitive form a construction which is usually called 'accusative and infinitive'), or 'accusativus cum infinitivo', the term traditionally used in Latin grammar (henceforth a. c. i.). They all semantically divide up the verbs that allow a. c. i. constructions into groups. These groups vary widely in number and nature but they basically cover the following main types in OE and ME:

I saw/heard him come downstairs

He let/made her do the work

The bishop ordered the mason to build his tomb

She believed the event to be of minor importance

Some grammarians do not explicitly make any further distinction within this a. c. i. group, they simply give examples of the constructions that occur. But most of the grammarians subdivide the a. c. i. into various categories, but these are not always based on the same criteria.

The simplest subdivision that can be made for OE is that between so-called 'dative and infinitive constructions' and 'accusative and infinitive constructions

depending on whether the matrix predicate governs a dative or accusative object NP. The problem is that some verbs can take a dative as well as an accusative object in OE.

For ME the distinction between dative and accusative cannot be used at all since these cases have collapsed in most dialects. This collapse was already a fact in late OE for most pronouns and in the course of the ME period one can also no longer distinguish between dative and accusative noun phrases.

Although a formal distinction between dative and accusative case cannot be used as a classificatory criterion within the a. c. i. group, it may point to a syntactic difference. In OE a dative case indicates that the dative object NP is directly governed by the matrix verb, whereas an accusative case form can have a twofold syntactic analysis. In connection with the ambiguity of the accusative case quite a few grammarians made a distinction between two types of construction.

Visser stases that he disapproves of the term accusative and infinitive since English no longer has an accusative case. He invents the term VOSI, (Verb – Object/Subject – Infinitive), which covers all the infinitive complement constructions preceded by a NP (next to VOSI constructions he distinguishes VOSING (-ing form instead of infinitive) and VOSP (past participle instead of infinitive) constructions). He discusses the VOSI construction after eleven different categories of verbs (e. g. verbs of causing, inducing and forcing, allowing and hindering, commanding and forbidding etc.), which are distinguished purely according to the semantic field to which they belong. The majority of the grammarians (Krickau, Zeitlin, Riggert, Callaway) make use of this kind if division. It provides us with lists of useful examples, but it does not give any insight into the nature of the complement constructions themselves.

Historical syntax has been studied to a much smaller extend than either phonetics, lexicology or morphology. Though the main trends in the development of syntactic structure appear to be clear, many more detailed investigations have yet to be made to complete the picture.

References

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