

# The role of the conservative learner in the rise and fall of verb-second

This paper argues that the diachronic rise and fall of verb-second grammars is tied to the conservative nature of child structure projection, as children bundle features on a single head unless forced to articulate further by input data. We contend that both Internal and External Merge are invoked sparingly by the acquirer, whose interim structures along the developmental path prescribe latent diachronic pathways available to become activated by relevant changes in the learning context. We interpret the remarkably strong areal effects of verb-second as singling out *language contact* as the primary, external impetus of these changes.<sup>1</sup>

Verb-second languages like the Modern Germanic languages (except English) or Old French exhibit two characteristic surface properties which hold of the vast majority of main clauses. First, the general availability of inversion with all predicates, and secondly, a restriction to a single constituent in the prefield (the area to the left of the finite verb). Both of these properties are illustrated in (1):

- (1) [*miels*] *voudroie je morir a honor que vivre a honte*  
better would I die at honor than live at shame  
'I would rather die with honour than live in shame.'  
(*La Vie de Tristan en Prose*, early 13th century Old French; Curtis 1963:61)

While there is consensus among a majority of linguists today that G-inversion should be accounted for by V-to-C movement of the finite verb, the mechanism behind the second property - the restricted prefield - still remains elusive. The advent of CP-cartography (Rizzi 1997 *et seq.*) has if anything exacerbated this problem, as the restriction to a single XP is surprising in view not only of the wealth of left-peripheral positions uncovered by cartographic research, but also since all these different information-structural readings are also available to the single preverbal constituent in V2 languages.

We argue that a cartographic left periphery cannot be acquired on the basis of the input in V2 languages, since the co-occurrences of phrases that would allow children to extend the phrase marker are not available,<sup>2</sup> and since other potential cues provided by information structure and prosody only reveal the existence of different *features*, not different *projections*. This view is corroborated by the evidence from the acquisitional literature on V2 languages (Westergaard 2008), which reveals that children do not go beyond the input by combing left-peripheral XPs, as the strong cartographic tenet 'One feature, one head' (OFOH) would lead us to expect. Doing away with OFOH, we assume that children are conservative structure builders that look for unambiguous evidence for syntactic positions (see Snyder 2007), and that their interim grammars contain *feature bundles* (Hsu 2017) that may potentially be *unravalled* (in the sense of Pannemann 2007) into distinct heads upon the discovery of more fine-grained syntactic structure. The unravelling of the left-periphery is illustrated in (2):<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>V2 in Europe coincides almost perfectly with the Germanic language group except English. Both non-Germanic V2 varieties (Estonian, Rhaeto-Romance, possibly Sorbian) and Germanic non-V2 varieties (Western Flemish dialects (Haegeman and Greco 2016)) are located in contact areas inside and at the fringes of this V2 *Sprachbund*.

<sup>2</sup>All V2 languages allow linear V3 in left-dislocation structures. These clearly reveal the existence of an additional left-peripheral position above the V2 construction, but are otherwise orthogonal to the claims we make here.

<sup>3</sup>The structure in (2) is kept minimal for illustrative purposes, omitting unlexicalised heads, and only contain the two coarse features 'topic' and 'focus'. Each of these comes in a variety of flavours which suggest further features, such as *aboutness topics*, *contrastive topics*, *shifting topics*, etc.

