

Information Structure and OV-VO Variation in West-Germanic: A Comparative Perspective

All early West-Germanic languages show varying mixtures of OV and VO order. This paper focuses specifically on OV-VO variation in the Low West-Germanic languages Old English (OE), Old Saxon (OS) and Middle Dutch (MD). Earlier research focussed on the grammatical status of the variation in OE (e.g. van Kemenade 1987, Pintzuk 2005 and Biberauer & Roberts 2005), but recently the debate has shifted to explaining the variation from a pragmatic perspective (see Taylor & Pintzuk 2012, de Bastiani 2017 and Struik & van Kemenade 2018). The key questions that will be addressed in this paper are: 1) to what extent information structure (IS) can account for this variation in OS and MD 2) if and how OE, OS and MD differ in this respect. A comparison of these languages is of interest because English developed into a strict SVO language, whereas Dutch and German became (more) strictly OV. It is therefore particularly interesting to compare their OV/VO variation, as a prelude to establishing how and why they diverge.

Where the (syntactic) history of English has received much scholarly attention, studies on the syntax of OS and MD are few and far between, especially in relation to IS. One notable exception is Walkden (2014) on OS, who follows Taylor & Pintzuk's (2012) methodology on OE. Their method presupposes phrase structure competition and they find only a weak effect of IS. More recently, Struik & van Kemenade (2018) show that abstracting from structural assumptions about the underlying syntax of OE yields a very clear relation between IS and word order. In fact, they are able to directly correlate OV order with givenness of the object, while VO orders are more mixed in terms of IS. This lends support to the hypothesis that in OE, VO is the default word order.

This paper will replicate the methodology in Struik & van Kemenade (2018) on the OS HeLiPad corpus (Walkden 2015) and the minor OS texts in the Referenzkorpus Altdeutsch (Donhauser 2015), as well as on the Dutch Historical Compilation corpus (Cousse 2010) to see if OE, OS and MD OV/VO variation is governed by IS in the same way as OE. The database includes all subclauses with two verbs and a direct object and is annotated for IS using a binary given-new distinction (based on Pentaset guidelines (Komen 2013)) and weight. The results are analysed by means of a multinomial logistic regression in a mixed model. They indicate that OV/VO variation is strongly governed by IS in OE. In fact, new objects hardly ever appear in OV word order, whereas given objects are mixed OV/VO. This fits an analysis of OE as a VO language, where OV word order is the result of movement to spec, ν P, driven by an EPP feature on ν which only attracts given objects (as developed in Struik & van Kemenade in prep)¹.

The effects of IS in OS and MD are less straightforward. First of all, there is less variation between OV/VO (OS and MD are over 80% OV, whereas OE is 63% OV). However, in both languages, there is a significant pattern; given objects are more frequently OV than new objects, although there is no one to one correlation between word order and IS-category, as there is in OE (i.e. OV = given). Furthermore, VO in MD is associated with heavy objects, or objects in a construction with a list-reading:

(1) Ghegeuen hebben toechten_ lene dit vorghenoemde goet van scoenhoe ...

‘[We] have rightfully given as a loan: this aforementioned item from Schoonhoven’

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Thus, while the trigger for given as well as new objects is similar to that in OE, it appears to be weaker in both cases.

¹ Although not the main topic of this talk, the analysis in Struik & van Kemenade (in prep) can also derive OV order for quantified and negated objects. These are also moved to spec, ν , but as a result of feature-checking requirements higher in the clause. These objects have to move to the phase edge to be visible for higher Probes.

These observations lead to the conclusion that, while the syntax of OV/VO in OS and MD is basically very similar to that in OE, the trigger is not unequivocally information structural: OV order is not triggered by givenness alone. However, the data do not support a parametrically opposite analysis either: postverbal word order is also not the result of newness alone. This paper will try to capture the observation that in previous stages English, German and Dutch allowed similar variation in terms of verb-object order and sketch a scenario which appreciates the genealogical relatedness of these languages, but which at the same time allows enough variation for these languages to each develop in their own ways (cf. Koster 1999 for a similar proposal). In terms of OV/VO variation, this means that the EPP feature on *v* is less ‘specialized’ in German and Dutch; it is not restricted to given objects, but attracts any object. The EPP feature in English becomes more ‘specialized’ and is eventually lost. This results in a typology in which syntactic differences are minimal, but which allows maximal differences in outcome.

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