

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

Despite a close genetic relation, Dutch, German and English show a puzzling difference in one very fundamental syntactic respect: the order of the verb and the object. Present-day Dutch and German are classified as OV languages, while English is classified as a VO language. It is even more intriguing that these languages share a similar history: one with mixtures of OV and VO order. This raises the question if these languages were the same, but diverged or if these languages were different to begin with, and further diverged.

OV/VO variation has been studied most extensively for Old English (OE) (van Kemenade 1987, Pintzuk 2005, Biberauer & Roberts 2005, Taylor & Pintzuk 2012, Struik & van Kemenade 2018), but studies on Old Saxon (OS) and Middle Dutch (MD) are few and far between (but see Walkden 2014 on OS and Blom 2002 on MD) and there are no systematic comparisons of these languages. This paper will explore the influence of information structure on object position in a systematic way for the historical stages of these languages. It will replicate the methodology in Struik & van Kemenade (2018) on the HeLiPad corpus (Walkden 2015) and the minor OS texts in the Referenzkorpus Altdeutsch (Donhauser 2015), as well as the Dutch Historical Compilation corpus (Coussé 2010) to see if OE, OS and MD OV/VO variation is governed by IS in the same way. The database includes all subclauses with two verbs and a direct objects and is annotated for IS using a binary given-new distinction (based on Pentaset guidelines (Komen 2013)) and grammatical weight. The results are analysed by means of a multinominal logistic regression in a mixed model. The results indicate that OV/VO variation is still strongly governed by IS in OE, fitting an analysis of OE as a VO language, but that the effect of IS in OS and MD is not as strong, suggesting that these languages were different and further diverged in their histories.

References

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