

Syntax and Information Structure: the diverse nature of V2 in early English

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It is well-known that the term verb second (V2) as applied to the Germanic languages, present-day as well as historical, does not represent a unified phenomenon. For instance, Westergaard and Vangsnes (2005) show that Norwegian dialects vary with respect to V2 word order in different types of *wh*-questions, and they argue that this variation is conditioned by both syntactic and information-structural considerations. Relevant syntactic factors include the category and function of the initial *wh*-element, while apparent optionality is shown to be the result of the information value of the subject as either given or new information. Thus, V2 word order typically appears when the subject is a full DP, while non-V2 is preferred when the subject is a pronoun. Recent work on Old and Middle English also shows the relevance of information structure to the choice of word order options, see e.g. Bech (2001) or Westergaard (2005), who have considered V2 in a relatively limited corpus. In van Kemenade and Milicev (2005), van Kemenade and Los (2006), and van Kemenade, Milicev and Baayen (2007), the focus is on the existence of two subject positions in embedded clauses in OE, preceding or following certain adverbs (typically *þa/þonne*). They show that the high position is typically filled by full DPs, while pronouns usually appear in the lower one, arguing that the two positions are distinguished by information structure.

In this paper, we explore the interaction of syntax and information structure with respect to V2 in a selection of Middle English texts from the PPCME2 corpus, representing four different subperiods of ME. We focus on XP-initial main clauses with a finite verb and a full DP subject, taking account of the syntactic as well as information-structural properties of all three of these relevant elements. It is shown that various factors play a role for the choice of word order, e.g. whether the verb is unaccusative or unergative or whether the subject is definite, specific or has been previously mentioned in the discourse. The information structure patterns identified are then used to account for the loss of V2 taking place during the ME period.

References

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