

Microvariation as Diachrony: A View from Acquisition

This paper discusses some microvariation found in main clause *wh*-questions in Norwegian dialects, where V2 (verb-second) word order occurs alongside non-V2. The microvariation is related to the type of *wh*-constituent present and is argued to represent different stages of a diachronic development (see also Vangsnes 2005, Westergaard 2005). The paper investigates a corpus of spontaneous speech from eight adults and three children (altogether 70 hours of recordings), all speaking Northern dialects of Norwegian (mainly Tromsø). It has often been argued that there is a word order distinction in the Tromsø dialect based on the length of the *wh*-constituent, long *wh*-words and full *wh*-phrases requiring V2, and monosyllabic *wh*-words allowing both word orders. This paper shows that the distinctions are finer than this: All speakers show a somewhat higher frequency of non-V2 with the question word *ka* ‘what’ than the other two monosyllabic *wh*-elements *kor* ‘where’ and *kem* ‘who’. Two of the speakers allow non-V2 also with longer *wh*-elements, but for these there is a considerable difference in frequency between the monosyllabic and the disyllabic *wh*-words, and then again between the latter and the full *wh*-phrases. Thus, the option to use non-V2 is a clear function of the complexity of the *wh*-element. This is illustrated for one individual speaker in Table 1.

Table 1: The percentage of non-V2 across different *wh*-questions, MOT Ann.01-21, N=863.

<i>Wh</i> -element:	<i>ka</i> ‘what’	<i>kor/kem</i> ‘where/who’	<i>korsen/korfor/katti</i> ‘how, why, when’	Long <i>wh</i> -phrases
% of non-V2	91.3% (481)	72.1% (176)	20.5% (9)	8.5% (4)

These findings are compared to some recent data from German dialects, discussed in Bayer&Brandner (2006). According to their investigations, there is a distinction in embedded questions with respect to the ‘doubly filled COMP’ filter, in that the presence of the complementizer *daß* ‘that’ in C (which is ungrammatical in the standard language) is dependent on the length of the *wh*-constituent: *daß* is more or less required after full *wh*-phrases, less so after disyllabic *wh*-words and least preferred after the monosyllabic *wh*-words. Similar data can be found in certain Southern Swedish dialects, where the presence of the complementizer *som* in C in embedded non-subject questions is more acceptable the longer the *wh*-constituent is (Christer Platzack, p.c.). According to the Split-CP model in Westergaard&Vangsnes (2005) and Westergaard (in press), there are many types of V2 grammars (dependent on which clause types require a filled C head), and the difference between the dialects and the standard should then simply be due to different requirements on C in embedded questions.

The Norwegian data are given a diachronic analysis in terms of a theory of cue-based acquisition and change (Lightfoot 2006). Following Westergaard (2006), I also argue that gradualism in historical data is not due to grammar competition, but is the result of many small I-language changes involving microparameters. Bayer&Brandner (2006) discuss the German data in terms of a ‘latent C feature’, which is argued to be present in the short *wh*-elements in certain dialects. In this paper I argue that this C feature should be latent in *all* varieties, and I relate it to the Head Preference principle of van Gelderen (2004), which explains (well-known) diachronic processes from phrase to head in terms of economy. The latent C feature is thus a result of a general preference for heads, and I argue that this is again a result of natural tendencies for economy in acquisition. On this view, the least complex (and most head-like) *wh*-element *ka* ‘what’ is first affected by the Head Preference principle, then the somewhat more complex *kor* ‘where’ and *kem* ‘who’, and then finally the disyllabic *wh*-words. The frequency of the short *wh*-elements in the input (shown to make up approx. 95% in a sample of child-directed speech) will eventually cause the cue for V2 to fall below a critical level in the input, the result being that *wh*-questions lose the requirement for a filled C head. Similar analyses may be carried over to the German and Swedish dialect data.

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