The Development of Word Order in Old and Middle English: The Role of Information Structure and First Language Acquisition

Marit R. Westergaard
University of Tromsø – CASTL
marit.westergaard@hum.uit.no

In this paper I argue that patterns of information structure and processes in first language acquisition are important factors in the development from a V2 (verb second) to a non-V2 grammar. Examples will be drawn from Old and Middle English non-subject-initial declaratives, where there is some optionality between V2 and non-V2 word order. Optionality in syntax typically leads to a situation where the choice of word order is governed by pragmatic factors (see e.g. Bresnan & Nikitina 2003). In the history of English, I will argue that non-V2 word order is used if the subject is informationally given (often a pronoun), while V2 is preferred if the subject conveys new/focused information (often a full DP), see e.g. Bech (2001), Westergaard (2005). This is a pattern that is also found in some present-day Norwegian dialects, where both V2 and non-V2 word orders are found in wh-questions (Westergaard 2003).

In the history of English, this pattern leads to what I call an “information structure drift” in the direction of non-V2, simply due to the fact that subjects tend to be given information. This again causes V2 to be expressed less in the primary linguistic data that children are exposed to. Using a cue-based approach to acquisition and change (Lightfoot 1999, forthcoming), I argue that V2 word order may be lost when the frequency of the trigger falls below a critical level in the input. Furthermore, within a Split-CP model of clause structure, originally developed in Westergaard & Vangsnes (2005), I argue that a relatively sudden parameter change involving a particular head in the CP domain may be masked by verb movement targeting a lower functional head. This will be argued to be the head of the Foc(us)P(hrase), which attracts the verb only when the subject of the sentence conveys new information.

References:


