Within a cue-based model of language acquisition and change (e.g. Lightfoot 2006), this paper argues that patterns of information structure can be a factor causing word order change. Examples are taken from mixed grammars which allow two subject or object positions. In such mixed systems, children are exposed to the cue for a particular word order, e.g. OV or verb-second (V2), in only some of the relevant contexts in the primary linguistic data. However, according to Lightfoot, a cue must be relatively robustly expressed in the input – otherwise children may ignore it and the corresponding structure disappears from the language.

In mixed grammars where the syntax allows two word orders, patterns of information structure tend to govern the choice of the two (see e.g. Bresnan and Nikitina 2003). This has also been argued for historical data, e.g. Hróarsdóttir (2004) on the choice of VO vs. OV in Icelandic, or Westergaard (2005a) on V2 vs. non-V2 in Old and Middle English (OE/ME). In Icelandic, OV was chosen if the object was given information (often a pronoun), while VO was used if the object conveyed new information (often a full DP). Likewise, in OE/ME, non-V2 (XSV) was preferred if the subject was informationally given (often a pronoun) and V2 (XVS) if the subject was new/focused information (often a full DP). A further example is the two subject positions found in embedded clauses in OE (above and below certain adverbs), discussed in van Kemenade and Los (2006). Again, the higher subject position is preferred when the subject is informationally given (often a pronoun) and the lower one when the subject is new (often a full DP). Such patterns are also found in synchronic data, e.g. optional V2 in wh-questions in present-day Norwegian dialects, discussed in Westergaard (2005b) and argued there to be a stage in a diachronic development towards non-V2.

These patterns of information structure may gradually cause a statistical shift in the frequency of a particular cue in the input to children. It is commonly assumed that subjects tend to be given information, while objects more often express new information. Investigating a Norwegian corpus of child-directed speech, this paper shows that this is indeed the case in the input to children. While e.g. approximately 85% of all subjects are pronouns, the situation is reversed for objects, which are expressed by pronouns less than 30% of the time. This means that in systems allowing two subject positions, there should be a natural increase in the pattern that is preferred for given subjects, e.g. non-V2 or the higher subject position in embedded clauses in the history of English. Conversely, in mixed OV/VO systems, information structure should gradually cause a higher frequency of VO. While other factors (e.g. dialect contact) may reverse such changes, the paper shows that in the examples at hand, the direction of the historical change corresponds to the prediction of this information structure drift.