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The loss of V2

This paper reconsiders the loss of V2 in the history of English, incorporating recent work on IS. IS factors that contribute to V2 variation during the Middle English (ME) period are: type of finite verb (auxiliary vs. lexical verb; transitive/unergative vs. unaccusative verb; information status of the first constituent; information status of the subject. The most important conclusion is the paradox that the loss of V2 does not reflect loss of verb movement in any sense central to the construction: the essential change does not affect finite verb placement; rather, it is argued, subjects (particularly nominal subjects) increasingly come to be placed on the left of the finite verb. The overall backdrop for this development is in the relation between syntax and information structure: at the stage when V2 inversion was robust, the first constituent was most typically a discourse linker, and there were (at least) two subject positions : a preverbal one dominantly reserved for discourse-given subjects, and a postverbal one dominantly reserved for non-given subjects, as argued in van Kemenade and Westergaard (forthcoming). The breakdown of this distinction is at the heart of the change: in late ME (AD 1350-1500) the number of preverbal subjects rapidly increases and increasingly comes to include non-given subjects. The preverbal subject position thus becomes a syntactic norm, and the subject rather than the constituent preceding the subject becomes the unmarked discourse linker. Another way of summarizing this development is that we are witnessing a change from topic-initial to subject-initial syntax.

The evidence presented in the discussion is a case study on the placement of three types of finite verb (transitive/unergative, unaccusative, auxiliary) with respect to various types of subject, following a clause-initial adverb, (data from the Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English, version 2, and the Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of early Modern English). The overall results for decreasing V2-inversion mask a tremendous amount of variation between contexts, and while inversion was possible in all of them until the end of the early Modern period, the various word order options were employed at very different rates, depending on type of first constituent, type of subject, and type of finite verb, showing that there was no substantial change in V-movement at the time usually assumed for the loss of V2. The final loss of V2 inversion was not complete at the end of the early Modern period, and should presumably be taken to coincide with the change that is known in the literature as the loss of V to I movement, interacting with the auxiliiation of modals and the rise of do-support.