

## A typological switch in early Modern English? The Loss of Verb-Second in English and its Consequences

Old English main clause verbs move to a high clausal position; this movement creates a position before the verb in which any constituent from the clause may move (“verb-second”). A typical characteristic of such first constituents is that they serve to link the clause to the preceding discourse, or serve to anchor the new clause in space or time; this is why demonstratives, and deictic adverbs like *þa* ‘then’ or *þær* ‘there’ are very frequent in this position. Verb-second makes a clause-initial position available for discourse linking and temporal or spatial anchoring, and allows the speaker to reserve the subject position for the protagonist. In Present-day English, the subject has to do double duty: discourse linking and encoding the protagonist (Los 2009).

Recent psycholinguistic studies by e.g. Carroll & Lambert (2003) and von Carroll, von Stutterheim & Nuese (2004) have uncovered a typological distinction at the level of macrostructural planning (“deciding what to say and how to say it”) which throws a new light on the function of the first position in a verb-second language.

Von Stutterheim, Carroll & Nuese’s (2004) claim that the typological distinction affects perspective (“what to say”) is particularly interesting: when asked to give an online description of events in an animation involving a clay-figure as protagonist, English speakers tend to take a camera-perspective and describe every event as it happens, whereas German speakers only describe events that affect the protagonist. English speakers tend to see events as temporally overlapping, whereas German speakers, with their special position for temporal anchoring, tend to them as consisting of a series of temporal segments, each with their own beginning and endpoint, nose-to-tail. The use of the specialized first position means that there is a lot of linking (temporal, spatial and discourse) in German and Dutch, compared to English.

Our project “*Syntax and Information Structure: Discourse Options after the Loss of Verb-Second*” tries to assess the situation in Old English: does Old English, with its version of the verb-second rule, conform to the situation outlined above for German? Did the loss of verb-second involve a typological switch? If yes, this suggests that a number of diachronic phenomena which are normally regarded as independent developments – the rise of crosslinguistically-rare passives, a grammaticalized progressive, and stressed-focus clefts in Early Modern English – , are in fact connected at a deeper level.

### References:

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