

Information structure and language change

In the last years a substantial body of work was done to demonstrate the influence of information structure on the ordering of constituents in sentences. For OHG it has been shown that structures that deviate from the dominant V_{end}+V₂-grammar are motivated by special information structural effects, such as Focus (e.g. VO-order in subordinate clauses), or by discourse reasons (V₁ vs. V₂). Nevertheless, an important question remains: why do these structures – which are optimal from an information-structural perspective – disappear?

Some of the answers given involved strictly grammatical factors. Thus, Hinterhölzl (2009) put forth the hypothesis that in OHG the emergence of the definite article is the factor which finally leads to the preposing of constituents and to the dominance of the OV order. For OE, Speyer (2007) explains the decrease of topicalization by a phonological principle which says that two stressed constituents next to each other should be avoided.

This paper addresses the question if information structure itself might also create non-optimal (or “bad”) information structures. It discusses some data of late OHG which could be analyzed as unintended bad results of verb focussing. As a consequence speakers try to avoid these bad structures what leads to the decrease and finally disappearance of grammatical patterns.

As it is work in progress, the question is whether there are other data that show similar effects – be it different languages or different phenomena.

Literature:

Hinterhölzl, Roland (2010): Zur Herausbildung der Satzklammer im Deutschen. Ein Plädoyer für eine informationsstrukturelle Analyse. In: Ziegler, Arne/ Braun, Christian (Hg.): Historische Textgrammatik und Historische Syntax des Deutschen. Traditionen, Innovationen, Perspektiven. Berlin/ New York: De Gruyter, 121-138.

Speyer, Augustin (2007): Topicalization and Clash Avoidance. On the Interaction of Syntax and Prosody in the History of English with a Few Glimpses at German. Diss. University of Pennsylvania.