

The change from OV to VO in English:
the interaction of syntactic change and information status effects
Ann Taylor and Susan Pintzuk, University of York

It is well-known that the position of constituents in the clause may be influenced by information structure. If we define ‘given’ information as that known by or accessible to the hearer, and ‘new’ information as that not known and not accessible, the cross-linguistic generalization is that given information frequently comes early in the clause and new information is placed towards the end (see, for instance, the ‘Given Before New Principle’ of Gundel 1988). In languages such as Present-Day English (PDE), the position of arguments is largely fixed; there is little scope for information structure to influence the position of particular arguments in basic SVO sentences. In contrast, in Old English (OE) the position of objects is much freer than in PDE; therefore we might expect a tighter correlation between information status and object position in a wider range of OE clauses. Although early studies of OE have looked at information structure as an effect on word order, most of these present qualitative rather than quantitative results. Noted exceptions are Bech 2001 and Kohonen 1978 (cf. also Taylor & Pintzuk 2009, 2010, to appear). Kohonen investigates the position of subjects, objects and adverbials in one OE and two Early Middle English (EME) texts. His overall conclusion is clear: “The study of givenness showed that there was a general tendency to arrange constituents in a given-new perspective.” (Kohonen 1978:191). Likewise Bech 2001 investigates the interaction of syntax and pragmatic factors in Old and Middle English and concludes that the OE verb-second (V2) constraint can be overridden in some clause types by the demands of ‘information value’, which is correlated with given/new information status.

In this talk we investigate the relation between syntactic change and information status on alternations in OE and EME verb-object order, OV vs. VO. Our main hypothesis is that syntactic change and the constraints of information status are independent. We show that while the syntax of the OE/EME VP is changing over time in AuxV clauses, such that the frequency of underlying VO order is increasing, this change is not in any way triggered by or related to changes in information structure. Rather, the effects of information structure remain constant over time. We use a model which posits two post-verbal object positions, one associated with underlying head-final VPs (the conservative variant) triggered by focus and one with underlying head-initial VPs (the innovative variant) with no particular information structure constraints attached. We show that as the innovative head-initial VP increases in frequency over time at the expense of the conservative head-final variant, the proportion of new objects in post-verbal position approaches the overall proportion of new information objects in the text. We argue this is the result of the high proportion of new objects in post-verbal position in underlying head-final VPs being increasingly diluted by the lack of any such effect in the innovative head-initial VPs, as this latter type increases over time. In addition, we show that, as predicted by the model, there is no change in the frequency of new objects in pre-verbal position in AuxV clauses over time; nor is there any change in VAux clauses in either pre- or post-verbal position, as these clauses are not affected by the change from OV to VO.

References

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