

Verb-third in early West Germanic: a comparative perspective

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In this paper I develop an analysis of the alternation between verb-third (V3) and verb-second (V2) in the older West Germanic languages, in the process calling into question the diachronic scenario presented by Hinterhölzl & Petrova (2009), who propose that V3 clauses arose following a reanalysis in Old English/Old Saxon. I argue that the structure underlying such clauses must be traced back at least as far as Proto-West Germanic.

V3 clauses with subject pronoun in preverbal position have been recognised as the dominant pattern when a non-subject constituent is fronted in Old English since Kemenade (1987). Direct and indirect object pronouns may also occupy this position, as in (1). The presence of a full subject DP in second position is rarer, but examples exist, as in (2). As observed by Bech (2001), such examples indicate that an analysis in terms of the clitic status of such pronouns, as in Kemenade (1987) and Roberts (1996), cannot be correct.

(1) *Fela spella him sægdon þa Beormas ...* (Oros, 14, 27) (Haeberli 1999: 337)

Many stories him told the Permians
'The Permians told him many stories'

(2) *Nu se rica mann ne mæg her habban ...* (ÆLS, 1, 268.110) (Koopman 1997: 313)

Now the rich man neg can here have ...

More recently, Bech (2001), Westergaard (2005) and Hinterhölzl & Petrova (2009), among others, have proposed that these alternations are due to information-structural factors. In this paper I adopt such an analysis, based on the split CP model proposed in Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl (2007), in which the verb moves only as far as Fin⁰ (cf. Roberts 1996) and XP-elements in second position are familiar topics occupying SpecFamP:

(3) [_{ForceP} *Fela spella* [_{FamP} *him* [_{FinP} *sægdon...*

Comparative data from the other two West Germanic languages attested before 1000 AD - Old High German (OHG) and the little-studied Old Saxon (OS) - are then considered. The results of my own research into Old Saxon, based upon a corpus drawn from the OS *Heliand*, suggest that OS in fact disallows 'true V3' in root clauses - *pace* Hinterhölzl & Petrova, who claim that it patterns with OE (2009: 319). While the order XP-SubjPron-V is 'used consistently' (Haeberli 1999: 335) when an element other than *þa*, *þonne*, *ne* or a wh-phrase is fronted in OE, in OS this order is vanishingly rare (only 2 potential examples in the first 2000 lines), with subject pronouns almost invariably following the finite verb:

(4) *nu cumis thu te mînero dôpi* (Heliand 971)

now come you to my baptism

Hinterhölzl & Petrova (2009: 320, (12)a) give one putative example of V3 in OS:

(5) *Thar imu tegegnas quam en idis fan adrom thiodun* (Heliand 2984)

there him against came a woman from different tribe
'There, a woman from another tribe approached him'

However, this example can easily be explained by analysing it as an instance of an unmoved final verb (a pattern which must independently be assumed for all the early West Germanic languages) with the subject undergoing Heavy NP shift. On the other hand, I argue that the literature on Old High German (Tomaselli 1995, Axel 2007: ch. 5) suggests that V3, although rarer, is in fact grammatical in OHG root clauses in the same way it is in Old English, at least in early texts; again this is *pace* Hinterhölzl & Petrova, who argue that this was 'a very rare declining pattern' (2009: 316) and therefore that OE/OS must have undergone a different reanalysis to OHG (2009: 326). An example of V3 in OHG is (6):

(6) *bidhiu ih hepfu mina hant ubar sie* (Isidor, 220) (Axel 2007: 241)

therefore I raise my hand above them
'this is why I will raise my hand over them'

On the basis of economy and the phylogenetic grouping of these three languages, I therefore suggest that V3 is a retention from Proto-West Germanic: a scenario which posits parallel innovation of the same very specific property in both OE and OHG is less desirable than one which posits shared retention in these languages. On my hypothesis, only one prehistoric change exists to be explained: the loss of V3 in Old Saxon. I speculate that the differing developments of this alternation in the individual languages are due to the differing frequency and availability of null subjects in these languages.

The approach thus involves rejecting the hypothesis that V2 in Old High German arose from reanalysis of V1 orders accompanied by a left-dislocated aboutness topic while V3 in OE/OS arose from reanalysis of V2 orders with initial familiar topic accompanied by a left-dislocated aboutness topic (Hinterhölzl & Petrova 2009: 325-6). I argue that this approach is in any case not well founded, since no motivation for the posited difference between OHG on the one hand and OS/OE on the other is provided. We should therefore reconstruct topic-comment structures for at least Proto-West Germanic, rather than assuming that they were innovated in parallel by OE, OS and OHG as suggested by Hinterhölzl & Petrova (2009: 325-6).

I argue, then, that we must assume that the V2/V3 alternation between new and given subjects was already present in Proto-West Germanic. If so, some light is shed not only on the syntactic properties of the individual early West Germanic languages but also on those of unattested stages of the Germanic family tree.

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