

## Parametric Variation and the Verb-Second Constraint in Old English and Early Middle English



Linguistics

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### Abstract

Syntactic variation and change has attracted increasing interest within the field of historical linguistics during the past few decades. Much recent work on diachronic syntax has followed a Chomskian approach, adopting the Minimalist framework (Chomsky 1995). Taking into account recent contributions to current generative work on syntactic change, this paper will focus on the notion of parameters (e.g., verb-movement parameter, verb-second parameter) and the theories which account for parameter variation and change in Old and Middle English (e.g., van Kemenade 1987, 1997; Pintzuk 1999). Therefore, we will discuss the exploitation of functional heads within the Principles and Parameters framework and will focus on V-to-I movement and V/I-to-C movement. Considering the CP domain, we will present how C interacts with V (yielding verb-second word order) and with DP by discussing the role and position of the first constituent in a clause.

## 1. Introduction

The recent development of historical linguistics and comparative syntax has paved the way to a more rigorous study of word order change in the history of the English language. One of the most basic cases of parametric variation regards the position of the head element within a constituent. Questions have been raised as to the precise definition of the parametric theory of head-positions, and one of the most significant current discussions concerns second position systems, how they are innovated and what leads to their loss.

We start by outlining the analysis of head movement as it was presented in the syntactic theory from the early 1980s till present-day. In the first section, we discuss the approaches to the head movement parameter within the Principles and Parameters framework and present the triggers for head movement. Then we focus on verb movement to functional positions higher in the clause than VP (Inflection and Complementizer, respectively), by discussing each of them in turn. We present the verb-second phenomenon by focusing on the position of verbs in Old English and early Middle English, and taking into account two main perspectives: van Kemenade (1987, 1997) and Pintzuk (1999).

## 2. The Head-Movement Parameter and the Principles and Parameters Framework

Work within the Principles and Parameters model (henceforth, P&P) has been dominant within the generative framework since Chomsky's (1981) theory of Government and Binding (henceforth, GB). Thus, the Principles and Parameters approach involves both the Government and Binding

theory and the more recent Minimalist Programme (henceforth, MP). A distinction between the two models will be drawn when necessary in the paper.

Since the implementation of the Government and Binding theory, the Principles and Parameters model has offered a solution to the conflict between descriptive and explanatory adequacy, the system of rules within the Extended Standard Theory being replaced by universal principles that allowed for linguistic variation (parameters of variation). Thus, the phrase structure system for a particular language has been restricted to a set of parameters which determine the ordering of head-complement, head-adjunct, and specifier-head (Chomsky 1995: 53). A series of transformations responsible for the derivation of various kinds of constructions such as topicalization, wh-movement, extraposition, I-lowering, verb-raising, I-raising have offered a more accurate picture of the generative perspective. The general operation to which all these transformations reduce is the general process of Move  $\alpha$ , with  $\alpha$  being a category which ranges over all categories. The approach was generalized by Travis (1984) and has as a central idea:

(1) Head movement is the case of Move- $\alpha$ , where  $\alpha$  is the head.

Head movement<sup>8</sup> is subject to well-formedness conditions applying to movement operations, such as: structure preservation, locality and the requirement that the trace created by the movement operation meet the relevant well-formedness conditions on traces (Roberts 2011:196). The main locality condition on head movement is the Head Movement Constraint, originally proposed by Travis (1984) in (2):

(2) Head Movement Constraint or HMC (Travis 1984)

Head movement may not skip intermediate heads.

With the implementation of MP, the formal complexity of the previous models has been reduced to economy conditions which obeyed a “least effort” condition (Chomsky, 2000: 99). Thus, parameters are no longer logically independent entities, but features on functional entities within the lexicon, e.g. the categories C(omplementizer) and T(ense). Therefore, movement in MP is a last resort operation, consisting of the application of Merge and Copy which result in various types of feature checking.

In a P&P approach, the main cases of head movement are instances of verb movement, where the head is a verb, and the target of movement is a position in the clausal functional structure. The head category which governs the VP, is Infl., and the head category which governs IP, is C. According to the Head Movement Constraint, movement of the verb is restricted to Infl.

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<sup>8</sup> Head-movement operations have been analyzed both in earlier versions of generative grammar such as Pollock’s (1989) influential proposal of the split-IP hypothesis; den Besten’s (1983) analysis of Germanic Verb-second) and in later works of GB and minimalism.

## 2.1. Verb Movement and the Structure of the Inflectional Phrase

Within the minimalist framework (Chomsky, 1995), the visibility of rich morphological features at LF (Logical Form) triggers overt verb movement to Infl before Spell-Out in order to check and erase its Infl features. The feature varies parametrically as either strong or weak. Feature checking takes place through specifier-head or head-to-head adjunction, with V raising overtly to I where the V-feature is strong, and movement applying only in the covert, post-Spell-out part of the grammar where the V-feature is weak.

Following Pollock (1989), Chomsky (1995:147) argues that Infl can split into Agreement (AgrP) nodes, hosting non-interpretable agreement features related to the subject (Pollock's) and the object (person, gender and number). An intervening Tense Phrase (TP) expresses the eventive structure of the sentence. In Modern English, verb movement does not occur overtly because, contrary to earlier stages of the language, its V-feature is weak, and movement occurs only in the covert part of the grammar.

## 2.2. Verb Movement and the Structure of the Complementizer Phrase

Subject-auxiliary inversion in English, and Verb-Second (V2, henceforth) operations in Germanic languages have been assumed to involve movement of I to C (den Besten 1983). Given the HMC, V cannot move directly to C, prior to the operation of V-movement into the I-system.

Examples with overt verb movement in English include standard copula constructions ("Is John happy about the book?"); auxiliary *be* ("Is John learning?"), auxiliary *have* ("Has John read the book?"); standard modals ("May John watch the film?"); negative-initial clauses ("Never have I been so happy!"); interrogative contexts with dummy *do* or auxiliaries ("Who did you talk to yesterday?").

## 3. Symmetric and Asymmetric Verb-Second

The label "verb-second" is understood as a strict requirement that the tensed verb appear in second position in a root environment (i.e., in main clauses). The fundamental word order properties of main clauses (and some embedded clauses) in the Germanic languages (except for Modern English) involve an initial constituent followed by the inflected verb, with the rest of the clause in third position:

(3) [XP V + Infl [...]]

Under X-bar Theory, an instance of Specifier-Head-Complement configuration (see Chomsky 1986:1-2) is provided. Thus, the initial position of the clause (den Besten 1983) is filled with the inflected verb moving to the CP domain, and a constituent (the subject, object or the adverbial) moving to the specifier of C, with the third position being realized as the complement of C, the IP (Belletti and Rizzi 1996: 4).

According to recent studies, V2 languages fall into two major groups: symmetric and asymmetric languages. On the one hand, a subset of the Germanic languages, including Yiddish and Icelandic, manifest V2 in both main and embedded clauses. V2 is realized by movement of the tensed verb to I, and topicalization of a constituent to Spec, IP, which is an XP position, rather than an NP position (e.g., Pintzuk 1999). The above category contrasts with languages such as German, Dutch or Mainland Scandinavian which manifest an asymmetry between subject-initial and non-subject initial V2 clauses, the former being IPs (Spec, IP is the canonical position for the nominative subject) and the latter CPs, as suggested by Travis (1984). Here, Verb-Second is restricted only to main clauses.

Non-V2 languages (ModEn, ModFr) are characterized by movement of V to I (overt in ModFr and covert in ModEn), and no movement to C, except under restricted circumstances stated in 2.2.

#### 4. The Verb-Second Phenomenon in Old English and Early Middle English

In Old and Middle English, the situation is generally similar to that in Dutch or German as far as V2 is concerned. If the complementizer is not filled lexically in the main clause, the finite verb moves to C, whereas in subordinate clauses the complementizer is filled and verb movement does not occur (example 4):

(4) “Pæt him his winemagas georne hyrdon”

So that him his friends and kinsman with pleasure obeyed (Beowulf 65-66)

Following Travis’s (1984) asymmetric account of V2 languages, Ans van Kemenade (1987) assumes that Old English has S(ubject)O(bject)V(erb) word order with systematic verb movement to C in main clauses and head-final projections below C (I and V) in subordinate clauses.

Nonetheless, in contexts where a non-subject constituent is fronted, subject pronouns systematically occur between the fronted constituent and the finite verb giving rise to verb-third order (example 5). In topic-initial constructions, subject-verb inversion is the norm only when the subject is nominal (example 6). Furthermore, systematic subject-verb inversion with pronouns and full NP (DP) subjects occurs only in operator fronting contexts: questions, negation, elements like *þa* or *þonne* (examples 7 and 8). In the latter case, the first constituent is in Spec, CP, the finite verb in C and the clitic follows the finite verb. Personal pronouns are positioned to the left of a preposed finite verb leading to potential counterexamples of a V2 analysis.

(5) *Æfter þyssum wordum he gewende to þam ærendracan*

After these words he turned to the messenger

“after these words he turned to the messenger” (Aelfric’s Life of Saint Edmund 83)

(6) *On twam þingum hæfde God þæs mannes sawle gegodod*

In two things had God the man’s soul endowed

“With two things God had endowed man’s soul” (Aelfric’s Homilies.1.20.1, as cited in van Kemenade 1987:17)

(7) Ne *geseah hine* nan man nates-hwon yrre. (Aelfric’s Lives of Saints XXXI, 306 as cited in van Kemenade 1987: 114)

Not saw him no man so little angry

No one ever saw him so little angry.

(8) Hwæt *sægest þu* yrþlincg? (Aelfric’s Colloquy 22, as cited in van Kemenade 1987: 138)

What saist thou, ploughman

What do you say, ploughman?

Van Kemenade (1987, 1997) analyzes OE personal pronouns as Wackernagel clitics<sup>9</sup>, which means that they are not to be counted as constituents in assessing the position of the verb. Thus, a large number of cases where the verb is apparently in third or fourth position is eliminated.

(9) “God *him worhte* þa reaf of fellum” (Homilies of Aelfric I, 1.18.18 as cited in van Kemenade 1987: 114)

God them wrought then garments of skin

“Then God made garments of skin for them.”

Thus, in the analysis of van Kemenade (1987), the position of the pronoun is analysed as follows: in (5) the clitic subject is cliticized on the left of V/I (see 10) whereas in (7) and (8) procliticization is blocked by the operator character of the first constituent (*hwi, þa, ne* contracted with the verb) so that pronouns are enclitic on the finite verb (see 11) (van Kemenade 1997: 334).

(10) [<sub>SPec,CP</sub> topic [<sub>C</sub> pron-Vfin [<sub>IP</sub> ... ]]]

(11) [<sub>SPec,CP</sub> WH/NEG/þa [<sub>C</sub> Vfin-pron [<sub>IP</sub> ... ]]]

The root/non-root asymmetry is obvious when taking into account the position of subjects and verbs in embedded clauses, where only complements of bridge verbs may have topicalization (example 12).

(12) “Gregorius se trahtnere cwæð þæt forði *wolde drihten* getrahtnian þurh hine sylfne þæt bigspel ðe...” (Aelfric’s Homilies.II.88.13, as cited in van Kemenade 1997: 333)

Gregory the interpreter said that therefore wanted God interpret through himself the parable that...

<sup>9</sup>Pintzuk (1999) analyzes OE adverbs as clitics roughly the same type as the personal pronouns

As far as the Verb-Second phenomenon in Old and early Middle English is concerned, alternative analyses have been recently proposed. With respect to the analysis of main clauses, two main assumptions have been discussed regarding the distributional properties of nominal (full DP) and pronominal constituents (e.g. Fischer et al. 2000, Kroch and van Taylor 1997; Pintzuk 1999).

Following a symmetric account of V2 in Old and Middle English, Pintzuk (1999)<sup>10</sup> argues that clitic pronouns in OE move to the boundary between CP and IP and appear sentence-initially. Hence, when the verb moves to I, the pronominal subject appears immediately before it, between the topic and the verb. On the contrary, movement is to C in operator-initial clauses<sup>11</sup>. Thus, while the finite verb is in C when Spec, CP is filled by an operator, it is in a lower position when the sentence-initial constituent is a topic<sup>12</sup>.

Within a minimalist framework where elements move for the purpose of feature checking, the Split-IP parameter leads to the following clause format: AgrSP-TP-AgrOP-VP. Thus, in an interrogative context, for example, the [Q] and [WH] features would attract the finite verb and the wh-expression.

The loss of V2 was attributed to the loss of empty expletives (Haeberli 2002) and to a decliticization phenomenon (van Kemenade 1987) whereby pronominal and nominal subjects start behaving alike yielding verb-third order (around 1400). Given Pintzuk's symmetric account of V2, she argues the loss of V2 corresponds to the loss of V-to-I movement. Contact situations between northern and southern dialects have also been identified as a reason for the loss of V2, given the Scandinavian influence in the north-west and north of England (Kroch and Taylor 2000). As a result of internal and external factors, verb-second declined and the word order of present day English, SVO, emerged.

## 5. Conclusion

Within the Principles and Parameters framework, three main parameters could be distinguished: V moves to I; V/I moves to C; and Spec, IP is a subject position. The Verb-second constraint characteristic of the Germanic languages involves movement to either of two different positions, depending on the language investigated. Van Kemenade (1987 and subsequent work) and Pintzuk (1999 and later work) present two attractive accounts of the V2 phenomenon in the history of

<sup>10</sup> Susan Pintzuk (1991, 1999) presents an alternative to the analysis of van Kemenade that is inspired by the idea of phrase structure variation. She demonstrates that OE texts manifest competition between two underlying phrase structures for clauses, one I-final and the other I-medial. Old English is assumed to exhibit head-final IPs with rightward V movement in non-V2 contexts, and head-medial IP, with leftward V movement in V2 clauses. Main clauses are more often I-medial and subordinate clauses more often I-final.

<sup>11</sup> This hypothesis is in contrast to CP-V2 languages, where the verb is always found in a higher functional projection. Pintzuk concludes that V-movement in embedded clauses and topic initial main clauses involves movement to I, with the topic in Spec, IP.

<sup>12</sup> The distinction between questions and topicalizations in OE helps explain that the fronting of the finite verb to C has remained unchanged in ModEn where the finite verb raises to C whenever there is an operator in Spec, CP. This conclusion is shared with van Kemenade (1987, 1997).

English. In Old and Middle English there are two potential landing sites for the finite verb, depending on the nature of the first constituent in the clause: C when an operator occurs in clause-initial position and the head of a head-initial inflectional projection below C when a non-operator is in initial position. As for the nature of clitic pronoun subjects and full nominal subjects, the former may occupy Spec, AgrSP, while the latter may be positioned either in Spec, AgrSP, or in Spec, TP when preceded by an operator. We follow Kemenade's hypothesis in assuming OE was an 'asymmetric' language and dedicate further work to the analysis of clitics and the loss of verb second in Middle English.

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