

Grammatical change and information structure

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Lecture 1: Verb second

In many languages, we can observe that despite appearances, the inventory of syntactic patterns remains relatively stable over time. What is primarily affected by ‘syntactic’ change is the mapping between form and (pragmatic) function. For example, we know that both verb first (V1) and verb second (V2) orders have been available as syntactic options throughout the history of the Germanic languages. Relevant changes linked to these patterns have not led to their demise, but rather to the extension/reduction of their discourse functions:

- In the present-day languages, V1 order is usually confined to certain sentence types such as imperatives and yes/no-questions, while in Early Germanic, it could be used for a greater range of functions (e.g., including declarative sentences with a wide focus, introducing new situations and discourse referents)
- In present-day English, V2 order is more or less confined to *wh*-questions (and a number of other constructions such as negative/locative/quotative inversion), while it used to be the most frequent, unmarked pattern in independent clauses of Old English.

In other words, it seems that syntactic patterns are not lost over time, but rather redeployed for other functions, or another range of functions. Moreover, relevant changes are usually linked to linguistic variation, involving either (i) competition between different strategies to realize one and the same pragmatic function, or (ii) the existence of patterns made available by the grammar that lack a clearly specified function and can be put into service for coding another function.

In this talk, I will take a look at a number of relevant developments in the history of the Germanic languages, focusing on the verb second (V2) phenomenon. Special attention will be paid to the Early Germanic origins of V2 and its subsequent development in English and German as well as to relevant changes affecting the set of discourse functions linked to V2 (and alternative word order options in main clauses). In addition, the diachronic facts will be classified in a typology of changes affecting the mapping between form and (pragmatic) function (loss and rise of form/function pairings, ‘fossilization’ of patterns previously linked to some function, cases of ‘takeover’ where the functions originally linked to some pattern A are absorbed by another pattern B etc.).