

The Verbal Complex and Focus in Zurich German and Other Varieties

1. Introduction

Unlike Modern Standard German, with fixed orders within the verbal complex, earlier stages of German and some contemporary dialects have variable order. For example, Zurich German has the 2-1 order (1a) like Standard German, the 1-2 or VR order (1b), and the VPR order (1c).

- (1) a. I ha gsäit, dass dä Martin en Roman **schriibe mues**. Zurich German
I have said that the Martin a novel write^{inf} must^{fin}
b. I ha gsäit, dass dä Martin en Roman **mues schriibe**.
I have said that the Martin a novel must^{fin} write^{inf}
c. I ha gsäit, dass dä Martin **mues** en Roman **schriibe**.
I have said that the Martin must^{fin} a novel write^{inf}
'I said that Martin has to write a novel.'

This paper investigates two-verb complexes in subordinate clauses, based on corpus studies of Middle High German (MHG) and Early New High German (ENHG) and questionnaires with speakers of German dialects.

2. Results

This paper identifies a number of factors that favor particular orders, including syntagm, the word preceding the verb complex, and extraposition of an argument. Most interestingly, focus has an effect on the verbal complex in historical and certain contemporary varieties of German. Schmid & Vogel (2004) make a similar claim for several dialects, but do not distinguish between focus *per se* and phonological stress. This paper establishes that the effect of focus is independent of stress. Wider focus favors the 2-1 order, while narrow focus on certain constituents tends to favor 1-2 or VPR.

According to my study of 1,133 MHG subordinate clauses, direct object focus strongly favors 1-2 while other focus conditions do not favor a particular order. My ENHG corpus of 2,921 clauses shows the same effect. In informal surveys with young speakers of Austrian German and Swabian, I found that 1-2 order is disfavored (contrary to earlier descriptions) but is somewhat more acceptable with a focused object.

In a questionnaire study with 23 speakers, I tested more precisely the effect of focus on these orders in the Zurich dialect. Background questions prompted participants to read the sentences with a specific focus interpretation and choose the answer with the most natural word order in that context. Participants did not prefer the 1-2 order (contra Lötscher 1978) but instead favored 2-1 and VPR, depending on information structure. The 2-1 order was preferred with the whole clause focused, VPR was best with a verb focused, and the two were about equal with VP or object focus.

3. Analysis

The analysis concentrates on Zurich German, for which the focus data are most clear. An analysis involving movement of the focused constituent to some position in the clause (say, FocP) is problematic. For example, with VP focus (which favors both the verb-final 2-1 order and the VPR order), we might say that the VP has moved into FocP, but it is difficult to motivate the position of the non-focused finite verb, which may remain low (2a) or move above the focused constituent (2b).

- (2) a. [_{CP} ... [_{FocP} VP_i [[t_i] V]]]
dass dä Martin EN ROMAN SCHRIIBE mues

- b. [CP ... V_j [FocP VP_i [[t_i t_j]]]
 dass dä Martin mues EN ROMAN SCHRIIBE

Moreover, this approach cannot explain the favoring effect of narrow object focus on the 1-2 order in MHG and ENHG: the object would move into FocP, but the order of the non-focused verbs relative to each other remains unmotivated.

Instead, this paper assumes that the sentential accent falls on the most deeply embedded constituent (Cinque 1993) and that a non-focused constituent will move out of the deep position, allowing the accent to fall on the next most deeply embedded word (Reinhart 1995). Using again the example of VP focus, in both the verb-final 2-1 order (3a) and the VPR order (3b) the object remains in situ, thus receiving the nuclear stress accent, which is compatible with focus on the VP.

- (3) a. [CP ... [VP [VP DP V] V]
 dass dä Martin EN ROMAN SCHRIIBE mues
 b. [CP ... V_i [VP [VP DP V] t_i]
 dass dä Martin mues EN ROMAN SCHRIIBE

Still, the movement of the finite verb in (3b) but not (3a) is unmotivated. Indeed, the movements needed to derive the word orders discussed here seem to be optional, since every order is acceptable (although some preferable to others) under each focus condition. As in Haider & Rosengren's (2003) analysis of scrambling, I argue that such movement is not motivated by syntax but because it disambiguates focus interpretation at the interface with pragmatics. As shown by Höhle (1992), a constituent appearing outside its "normal" position will not be part of focus. This can explain the slight preference for (3b) under VP focus: the displacement of the finite verb signals that it is not focused, thus this order disambiguates VP focus from wider focus. In effect, the displaced constituent creates an audible boundary for the focus projection.

This can explain a puzzle of the MHG and ENHG data: the association between object focus and the 1-2 order. Accent on the object with the "normal" 2-1 order would be ambiguous between object focus and wider (VP, clausal) focus, but displacing the non-finite verb (1-2) signals that it is not part of the focus, unambiguously indicating narrow focus on the object.

4. Conclusion

Older stages of German had variable word order within the verbal complex, which is preserved to some degree in Swiss dialects. This variation can be exploited at the interface between syntax and pragmatics to mark different focus interpretations.

References

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