

The consequences of the loss of V2 in the history of English

Bettelou Los, University of Edinburgh

The decline of V2 in the course of the 15thC (van Kemenade 1987; Warner 2007; van Kemenade & Westergaard 2012) was more than just the loss of a word order pattern, but meant the decline of a multifunctional first position that could host a constituent with any syntactic function and any information-structural status. The result was a fairly rigid mapping of syntactic function to information-structural status (subjects: given, objects: new information) as well as the loss of first position adverbials to express links to the immediately-preceding discourse, and being increasingly restricted to express frame-setters only (Los 2012). The change compromised the syntactic options available for information structure, with some orders remaining as “escape hatches” to position new subjects later in the clause (like subject-verb “inversion”, which is not so much a survival of V2 but has subject either remaining in or being adjoined to a low position) or new ones arising to deal with non-framesetter adverbials (contrastively-focused as in stressed-focus *it*-clefts (Komen 2013), discourse links as in *wh*-clefts of the *This is why/how* type), or with the new function of the subject as the only unmarked way to encode discourse links (crosslinguistically rare passives like passivized indirect objects, prepositional passives, and passives of ECM-constructions that do not have active counterparts (and are explicitly referred to as “information-packaging devices” in Birner & Ward 2002); Dreschler 2015). Contrastive German/English studies (like Carroll et al. 2004) show that the presence or absence of V2 has far-reaching consequences for macro-structural planning (what to say, and how to say it), which opens up the surprising possibility that even other 15th C developments which are not related to word order at all, like the rise of progressives, can nevertheless be argued to be part of the same upheaval. Similar work by Carroll & Lambert (2003) suggest that subjects play a very different role in V2 and non-V2 languages, and I will report on a study that tests out a number of hypothesis of the functions of English subjects in the history of English (Komen et al. 2014), as well as work done by Los and van Kemenade (forthcoming) that suggests an unusual trigger for the loss of V2: losses in the referential function of various deictic elements, some of which relate to the loss of gender.

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