

The left sentence periphery in Old High German – origins of a V2 grammar

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In this talk I will deal with the syntax of the left sentence periphery of Old High German (OHG). This work is the first investigation into OHG sentence structure that does not draw on data from secondary sources, but instead is based on a careful and philologically-orientated corpus analysis of the original texts.

First, I will discuss the syntax of XP-movement to the left periphery. In recent minimalist approaches to the V2 grammar of modern German, three ways of filling the prefield (= SpecC) have been distinguished (e.g. Fanselow to appear): (i) operator movement triggered by a +wh-/+ focus-feature, (ii) movement of the highest middle field constituent (= EPP-driven Stylistic Fronting), and (iii) Merge of an expletive. Types (i) and (ii) are already attested in my OHG data. For (i), there are ample examples with preposed (and even long extracted) *wh*-phrases and with leftward-moved contrastively focused constituents. For (ii), I will show that already in the earlier prose texts, the highest constituent in the middle field was moved to the left periphery in sentences with neutral information structure. The evidence for this is sentences containing predicates whose highest argument is non-nominative and those sentences containing certain high temporal adverbials. The third way of filling the prefield, however, i.e. base-generation of an expletive (iii), is not attested in OHG texts and developed only during the Middle High German period. Furthermore, I will address the question whether the OHG prefield could also be filled by silent XPs. I will show that, as in the modern Germanic V2 languages, a null topic could occur in this position in certain discourse environments. But I will argue that – similarly to Old French – (referential) null subjects were restricted to post-finite environments.

Second, I will address the question whether movement of an XP to/base-generation of an XP in pre-finite position was already obligatory in OHG. There existed two ‘types’ of verb first declaratives that are no longer found in Modern German. On the one hand, V1 order was systematically attested in sentences with subject extraposition. Concerning the syntactic analysis of such V1 declaratives, I will discuss whether there was an empty expletive in prefinite position (*pro*- V_{fin}) or whether they should rather be considered as ‘true’ V1 sentences with no silent XP in front of the preposed verb. On the other hand, declarative V1 order occurred in sentences containing sentence-typing particles. As I will argue, this phenomenon requires an entirely different explanation. Such sentences are probably residues of a former stage when sentence-typing was not primarily encoded via the linear position of the finite verb as in the modern language, but was conveyed by a specialised set of left-peripheral sentence typing particles such as narrative *thô*, affirmative *jâ*, interrogative *eno/inu*, and imperative *nu*. This suggests that the development of obligatory XP-fronting (via Stylistic

Fronting) was a result of the breakdown of the archaic Germanic particle system that is most prominently attested in the Gothic bible translation (cf. Eythórsson 1995, Ferraresi 1997).

Third, I will show that the ‘linear’ V2 constraint was more often violated in (earlier) OHG than in modern German. V3 effects are attested with certain adverbs (XP—adv—V_{fin}) and with pronouns (XP—pron—V_{fin}) (cf. also Tomaselli 1995). On first sight, the existence of V3 orders would suggest that the OHG the syntax of verb-movement was different from the New High German one. However, the traditional assumption (cf. Lenerz 1984), that the finite verb has not moved but is found in its base position in sentences with more than one XP in prefinite position, is not supported. Moreover, in contrast to Old and Middle English, there is no asymmetry between topic-initial and operator-initial sentences with regard to V3 effects triggered by prefinite pronouns in OHG (contra Tomaselli 1995). This shows that the finite verb does not systematically target different landing sites (e.g. I⁰ vs. C⁰) in these two syntactic contexts (contra Eythórsson 1995). Note that there is also no compelling evidence for verb-movement into a sentence medial functional projection in OHG dependent clauses. Instead, I will argue that V3 effects in OHG are reflexes of a former complex CP-structure with more than one XP-position in front of the preposed verb (cf. Roberts 1996 for Old English) that is still residually attested in earlier OHG. The reduction of the formerly complex to a simple C-projection – which is probably a reflex of the loss of the Old Germanic system of C-particles – is one further important step towards a ‘modern-style’ rigid V2 grammar.

To conclude, earlier OHG texts – though largely exhibiting the characteristics of a V2 language – still display a number of syntactic phenomena that cannot be analysed within a V2-grammar (such as V1- and V3-order in declaratives) or that are not typically associated with the V2 constraint (such as the particle system and the licensing of referential null subjects alongside non-referential ones). These phenomena shed interesting light on the question which syntactic steps the language had to take in order develop into a true V2-language.

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