

MANY SMALL CATASTROPHES: GRADUALISM IN A MICROPARAMETRIC PERSPECTIVE

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According to Lightfoot (1999, 2006), a diachronic change in grammars should not be gradual, but abrupt and ‘catastrophic’, illustrating a different setting of a parameter. Nevertheless, we often see gradualism in historical data, sometimes spanning several hundred years. This means that many generations of children are exposed to optionality in the primary linguistic data, with various input frequencies for a particular construction. A possible analysis of gradual change is grammar competition in the minds of speakers, as in e.g. Kroch&Taylor (1997). Another explanation, which I argue for in this paper, is that gradual development represents several minor changes in the I-language of speakers, caused by new settings of various microparameters. That is, gradualism is the result of many ‘small catastrophes’.

The focus of the investigation is the historical development from a V2 (verb second) to a non-V2 grammar. Examples are drawn from Old and Middle English (OE/ME) non-subject-initial declaratives and *wh*-questions in present-day Norwegian dialects. In both situations there is some word order optionality, and the variation in Norwegian has been argued to represent different stages in a development from V2 to non-V2 (Westergaard 2005).

In standard syntactic accounts, V2 is considered to be the result of verb movement to C. According to Lightfoot, the cue can be formulated as in (1), and for learnability reasons, there must be a UG requirement that this structure is obligatory. I adopt a revised version of a Split-CP approach originally introduced in Westergaard&Vangsnes (2005), in which the verb may move to various heads in the CP-domain. In this model, the ForceP of Rizzi’s (1997) system is split into different heads depending on clause type, so that e.g. V2 in *wh*-questions is the result of verb movement to an Int(errogative) head, while in declaratives the verb moves to a Top(ic) head. Thus, there are many types of V2 grammars, and consequently, many triggers for V2. This accounts for the early acquisition of mixed V2 systems (e.g. English or Norwegian dialects) as well as the historical loss of V2 in only one clause type.

- (1) $_{CP}[XP \text{ cV} \dots]$ (from Lightfoot, 2006, p. 86)

Investigating several OE and ME texts, I show that the word order of non-subject-initial declaratives was stable throughout OE at approximately 70% V2, changing to 50% in early ME and 30% in late ME. I argue that the different percentages represent slightly different I-language grammars, reflected in the (often recognized) subject preferences: In general, V2 is used if the subject is a full DP, see (2), while non-V2 appears with pronominal subjects, as in (3). In order to argue that OE is a consistently V2 grammar, a common analysis of this is that pronominal subjects are clitics (e.g. Kroch&Taylor 1997). However, opposite examples are also attested, see (4) and (5). I argue that the subject choice is caused by information structure, V2 being preferred with new/focused subjects and light verbs (often *be*), while non-V2 appears with subjects conveying given information (often a pronoun). This is accounted for by the lower TopP of Rizzi (1997), which I argue will attract informationally light/un-focused elements, either the verb (resulting in V2) or the subject (resulting in non-V2).

- (2) & of heom twam **is eall manncynn** cumen. (OE)

and of them two is all mankind com

- (3) Ælc yfel **he mæg** don.

each evil he can do

(from Kroch&Taylor 1997, p. 302)

- (4) þa siglde he þonan suðryhte be lande. (OE)
then sailed he from.there southwards along coast
- (5) For þrim þingum Hælend eode on westen.
for three reasons Savior went into wilderness

A detailed investigation of the subject and verb types in the historical English data reveals the following development: In the predominantly V2 grammar of early OE, the subjects in V2 clauses are equally divided between full DPs and pronouns. This changes considerably in late OE, when there is a predominance of DP subjects, a preference which persists throughout ME. For sentences with non-V2, there is a majority of pronominal subjects throughout OE as well as early ME, while the subject preference evens out in late ME. My interpretation of this is that in early OE, V2 is default, occurring with any kind of subject. Thus, there is general verb movement to the declarative Top° head in this grammar. In late OE and early ME, V2 occurs mainly with DP subjects, and this means that there is verb movement to a position which is sensitive to information structure, i.e. the lower Top° head. But in late ME, non-V2 takes over the default status and now occurs with any type of subject, indicating that this grammar has lost verb movement to the lower Top° head also. One cause of this is what I call an ‘information structure drift’. As subjects tend to be given information, the frequency of non-V2 should increase and cause the relative frequency of V2 to drop, eventually below a critical level for language acquisition. V2 only survives in special cases, mainly with the verb *be*, due to the very early acquisition of this particular verb.

An additional factor contributing to the loss of V2 is the role of the initial adverbs *þa* and *þonne* (ModE ‘then’). These always appear with V2 in OE, also when the subject is a pronoun. This means that they must trigger verb movement to the high Top° head. During the OE period, these adverbs are sufficiently frequent for children to acquire their special status. However, as they decline considerably in frequency, children ignore their special status, and in late ME they are no different from other adverbs with respect to word order.

For comparison, I also consider some data from present-day Norwegian dialects, where individual speakers are found to produce different proportions of V2 in *wh*-questions, which are similar to the findings for OE/ME; a mixed grammar, one where there is a predominance of V2 and one where there is a predominance of non-V2. The mixed grammar is shown to display clear subject and verb preferences with the two word orders, similar to the ones found for OE/ME. Thus, I argue that V2 is sensitive to information structure and that this grammar has movement to the lower Top° head. In the predominantly V2 grammar, V2 occurs with all subject and verb combinations, which indicates that this grammar has verb movement to the Int° head. In the predominantly non-V2 grammar, this word order is default and used with all subject and verb types – thus, there is generally no verb movement to either Int° or the lower Top°. V2 survives only in lexically marked cases, mainly with the verb *be* – as in English.

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