Encounters of the third kind - On the hybrid headedness property of Old Germanic language
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Abstract

It is widely accepted that there are two groups of Germanic languages, namely the OV group and the VO group. Viewed from a diachronic perspective, it is not clear, however, whether one or both should be regarded as an innovation. In the first case, one group would have left the other. In other words, was the Old Germanic situation an OV or a VO one? The question is illposed, I shall argue. Old Germanic languages were of a third kind. They were much like the present day ‘fossil’ Yiddish, namely a language with an adjustable directionality property for the verbal head. As a consequence, this allows typical OV orders, typical VO orders, and importantly, ‘hybrid’ orders, that do not occur in OV or VO.

If the historic variants of Germanic languages are regarded from this perspective, the development of the Germanic languages is much easier to understand. The basic change was one from an adjustable underspecified headedness value to a rigid one. The rigid directionality allows either of two values. The choice of the value is in principle free. One branch of Germanic languages fixed it in the OV way (West Germanic, except English), the other in the VO way (North Germanic). Eventually, two very similar languages in terms of their morphosyntactic make-up, namely Icelandic and German, ended up in different systems by accident. The accident is the choice of the directionality value when giving up the adjustability option.