OV, VO, and OV/VO orders in Older German: Syntactic optionality as “basin” for syntactic change

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Abstract

This talk deals with the interaction between information structure and syntax in word order change from the perspective of a more representational, morphology-oriented type of Generative Syntax in the spirit of e.g. Haider (1993, 1997a, b, 2000) or Sternefeld (2006a, b). On the empirical basis of data from Old and Middle High German, the following claims are defended: (1) As discussed by Schallert (2006, 2007), the parallelism and even blending of OV and VO structures found in languages like Older German (Old and Middle High German), Older English, or Older Icelandic stems from two sources, i.e.

- underspecification with regard to the canonical direction of licensing, in terms of e.g. Haider (2000, 2005).

- availability of optional VP shell projection, a mechanism still at work in Yiddish and, in a more restricted way, even in dialectal variants of modern German or Dutch, as evidenced by phenomena like Verb projection raising (VPR) or certain IPP constructions.

(2) Apart from the well-known „drift“ towards VO in English and Icelandic, there is also a corresponding one to OV in German, which can be attributed to optional VP shell projection becoming obligatory (= VO) or the (gradual) loss of this option (= OV). (3) Underspecification and optional shell projection interact with other domain-specific properties of a grammar like morphology, semantics (e.g. Verb projection raising is possible only with a certain subset of verbs), or information structure (the position of the finite verb separates different information structural domains). Thus, syntactic optionality acts as an important endogenous “basin” for syntactic change.

References

–2000. “OV is more basic than VO”. In The Derivation of VO and OV, Svenonius, Peter (ed.), Amsterdam: Benjamins, 45–67.