Discourse Structure and Information Packaging in Cross-Linguistic Perspective

Verb Placement in Early Germanic (B4)

Motivation
Results of earlier studies (Hinterhölzl et al. 2005) point that the inflected verb in Early Germanic enters the borderline between old and new information in an utterance and thus marks the beginning of the domain of new-information focus. This phenomenon is best shown on the complementary distribution of V1 vs. V2 in sentences of the presentational vs. categorical kind. A problem apparently arises with V1-sentences containing discourse-given referents:

Distribution of V1-patterns in Early Germanic
- text-initial sentences and episode onsets = new text sequence
- verb groups:
  - motion verbs = change in the local orientation of the narrative setting
- non-verb groups:
  - topical subject
- canonical predicate:
  - SVETLANA PETROVA
  - a. SV(O)
  - b. SV(O)
  - c. O#SV
  - categorical utterance with topic + comment
- hypotactic predicate:
  - the inflected verb in Early Germanic
  - topic + clausal comment
- paratactic predicate:
  - the inflected verb in Early Germanic
  - topic + clausal comment

Linguistic Relevance of Discourse Organization
Part of the investigation in projects B1 and B4 is concerned with the interaction between Information Structure and Discourse Semantics for the explanation of different phenomena in genetically non-related languages. We observed that similar principles of discourse organization can be traced as relevant for structuring discourse in Early Germanic and as well as in Western languages of the Gur group. In early Germanic, distinctions between sentences on purely discourse-related considerations are responsible for the placement of the inflected verb while in some languages of the Gur group, this is reflected in verb morphology as well as in the selection of connectives in context.

Interaction with grammar: aspect
The thematic construction (b) is the prototypical discourse referent irrespective of any remarkable event in the story line (individual-level predicates) and shows special imperfective features.

Morphosyntactic Variation in Gur (B1)

Empirical evidence
- a. Canonical predicate
  - verb tone paradigm
  - word order
  - man.DEF cook FM soup
  - The man cooked soup.
- b. Hypotactic predicate
  - verb tone paradigm
  - word order
  - man.DEF cook FM soup
  - The man cooked soup.
- c. Paratactic predicate
  - verb tone paradigm
  - word order
  - man.DEF cook FM soup
  - The man cooked soup.

State of affairs
Recent research points out that some languages of the Gur group (Bull, Konni, Dagbani, and others) use morphosyntactic means (verb morphology including tone, connectives etc.) to express a discourse-based difference between clauses with or without a topical subject.

In the canonical sentence construction (a), it is the speaker who is talking about the topic about which a comment is made within the same clause. Any discourse-based deviation from this canonical category configuration occurs in morphosyntactically marked constructions in which the predicate is either hypothetically (b) or paratetically (c) encoded.

Empirical evidence
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  - man.DEF cook FM soup
  - The man cooked soup.
- c. Paratactic predicate
  - verb tone paradigm
  - word order
  - man.DEF cook FM soup
  - The man cooked soup.

Interaction with grammar: aspect
The thematic construction (b) is the prototypical discourse referent irrespective of any remarkable event in the story line (individual-level predicates) and shows special imperfective features.

With the extra-clausal construction (c) transitional relations between referents and events (stage-level predicates) are denoted. The relation fades as soon as the plot of the story develops further and is constrained to the perfective aspect.