

V2 loss revisited: a quantitative comparison of English and French

Anthony Kroch
kroch@change.ling.upenn.edu
University of Pennsylvania

The existence of parsed corpora of historical English (Kroch and Taylor 2000, Taylor et al. 2003, Kroch et al. 2004, Taylor et al. 2006) has made practicable detailed quantitative studies of the temporal evolution of English word order. Recently, a Canadian project, *Modéliser le changement: les voies du français [MCVF]* (<http://www.voies.uottawa.ca/index.html>), has begun the creation of a parsed corpus of historical French. As a result, we now have the prospect of conducting similar quantitative studies of that language as well as quantitative investigations of the comparative evolution of French and English. Moreover, as suitably annotated corpora of more languages become available, we can foresee the emergence of a richly quantitative and fully comparative historical syntax.

In this paper, we take a step in the direction of this new subfield by revisiting the loss of verb-second word order in English and French, with particular emphasis on two common features of the languages that can now be specified in considerable detail. The first of these is the steep decline of direct object topicalization. Recent work by Speyer (Speyer 2005, 2008) confirms an earlier observation by Johnson and Whitton (2002) that the frequency of object topicalization in the course of Middle English drops by approximately a factor of 3 and the as yet incomplete but useable MCVF corpus reveals a similar decline between Old and Middle French. At the same time, the frequency of PP and adverb fronting remains largely constant in both languages. The second commonality (Hulk and van Kemenade 1995, Vance 1995, 1997, Haeberli 2000) concerns the evolution of the position of the subject in the two languages. In both French and English, there was in earlier periods a widely used low position for subjects which became more restricted over time. Given these common features, it is striking that the loss of verb-second word order follows a quite different trajectory in the two languages, because the grammatical starting point for the change was quite different in the two cases. Old English was probably not a strict V2 language and it did not exhibit V-to-C movement in topicalized sentences (Pintzuk 1991, 1993). Verb-second surface word order was not forced by any grammatical requirement but reflected rather a prosodically-driven propensity for the use of the low subject position in topicalized sentences. Old French, on the other hand, was a strict V-to-C V2 language (Adams 1987, Vance 1997) in which verb-second word order was forced by the same syntactic licensing requirement found in the modern Germanic V2 languages.

The loss of verb-second word order in Middle English resulted from a decline over time in the availability of the low subject position. This decline was accompanied by a decline in the frequency of topicalization because the prosodic requirement favoring the use of the low subject position in topicalized sentences in Old English did not change. The contrast with French is sharp. In the transition from Old to Middle French V-to-C movement was largely lost (Vance 1997) but the use of the low subject position remained robust, leaving Middle French with a grammar similar to that of Old English. Hence, we might expect Middle French to look much like Old English. There is good evidence for this equivalence but the low frequency of object topicalization in Middle French is then surprising, as object topicalization in French should decline only later on in French when the use of the low subject position becomes more restricted. The explanation for the drop in frequency of topicalization is, as has been suggested, that the loss of V-to-C movement in French was accompanied by a wholesale restructuring of the C-domain, something which has never happened in English.