

Discourse Structure and Information Packaging in Cross-Linguistic Perspective



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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 V/1 vs. V/2 in sentences of the presentational vs. categorial kind. A problem apparently arises with V/1-sentences containing **discourse-given** referents:

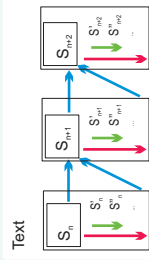
Distribution of V/1-patterns in Early Germanic

- text-initial sentences and episode onsets = **new text sequence**
- (1) Lat. **Factum est autem** 'In diebus illis' OHG **uuard** 'tho giſſin' 'in then tagon' (T 35, 7) [it] happened in those days
- verb groups:
 - motion verbs = change in the **local orientation** of the narrative setting
 - perception verbs in inchoative meaning = change in the **temporal orientation**
- (2) Lat. & ecce angelus domini OHG **quam** 'thara' 'gotes engel' (T 35, 32) 'There appeared God's angel'
- perception verbs in inchoative meaning = change in the **temporal orientation**
- (3) Lat. **credidit** 'homo semoni' OHG **glaubta** 'tho ther man' 'uortes' (T 90, 24) 'The man believed (=started to believe) to this statement'
- verbs of saying = **change of personnel**
- (4) Lat. & respondens angelus OHG **antſingota** 'tho ther engel' (T 28, 26) 'Then the angel responded'
- special cases
 - highlighting of important events: V/1 forces all-focus interpretation
- (5) OS a. **Tha** **uwas** 'thar en' 'gigamalod mann' / b. **that uwas** 'froud gomo [...] c. **Tha** **uwas** 'so salig man' [...] d. **Uwas** 'im thoht an sorogon huſi' / 'that sea erbiuuard egan ni moustun' (Hei 72-86) 'Then, there was an old-aged man, this was a wise man [...]. This was such a blessed man [...]. But they had great sorrow, for they had no child'
- chains of narrative sequences (=periods)
- (6) ON þá var forðrinn fullr af veiðiskap, ok gaðou þeir eigi fyrir veiðum at fá heyanna ok dó alt kviklé þeira um vetrinn. (Landnámabók 5) 'There was the fiord full of fish, and because of the fishing they didn't care to get hay, and all their cattle died in the winter'

Proposal

verb placement indicates rhetorical relations in Early Germanic

- V2 indicates **subordination** and **continuation**; here Vfin separates a topic from the comment/new-information focus
- V1 indicates **coordination**/ the end of a chain of continuation; no topic-comment structure applies



The notion of discourse coherence and discourse hierarchy in RST and SDR

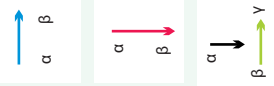
- discourse coherence** is achieved only if **each utterance** makes a **contribution to some other utterance** in the context
- the meaning of **discourse depends on its rhetorical structure**, i.e. on the **rhetorical relations** linking together the contents of the single discourse units
- units in discourse are linked together to build up a hierarchical structure of discourse organization (Mann & Thompson 1988, Asher & Lascarides 2003)

Prototypical discourse relations in SDRT

- Narrator**: prototypical relation of **coordination**
- events (α, β) display **no dependency relation**
- events (α, β) display a **temporal relation of succession**
- β **continues the narrative sequence** in discourse

Elaboration: prototypical relation of subordination

- events (α, β) form a **hierarchical relation** in discourse
 - events (α, β) **temporally overlap**
 - β provides **more detail** on α
- Continuation**: connects units on the **same level of dependency**
- β and γ both elaborate on α



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 structural variation in early Germanic languages as well as in West African 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.

Empirical evidence

- B L I**
- a. *Canonical predicate*
- verb tone paradigm α
 - postverbal focus marker
- b. *Hypotactic predicate*
- verb tone paradigm β
 - Buli: conjunction LE
 - Komni: verb suffix -NA
 - Dagbani: preverbal N-
- c. *Paratactic predicate*
- verb tone paradigm γ
 - Buli: conjunction TE
 - Komni: pronominal form (postnominal D)
 - Dagbani: conjunction KA

Interaction with grammar: aspect

The thetic construction (b) allows the speaker to present major (animate) discourse referents irrespective of any remarkable event in the story line (individual-level predicates) and shows special imperfective features.

- cf. secondary "imperfective" aspectual paradigm by verb suffix -NA in Komni
- cf. additional continuous "aspect" by preverbal N- within *Oti-Volta language* group

Morphosyntactic Variation in Gur (B1)

State of affairs

Recent research points out that some languages of the Gur group (Buli, Komni, 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:

Topic in sentence and discourse

In the canonical sentence construction (a), the subject represents the sentence topic about which a comment is made within the same clause. Any discourse-based deviation from this canonical categorial configuration occurs in morphosyntactically marked constructions in which the predicate is either hypotactically (b) or paratactically (c) encoded.

[+topical subject]:

- canonical predicate**: SV(O) categorical utterance with topic + comment
- hypotactic predicate (incorporation)**: SV(O) thetic utterance without topic
- paratactic predicate (coordination)**: O#SV topic + clausal comment

- The hypotactic predicate introduces major discourse referents to provide **background** for the upcoming events. The same thetic construction occurs in other backgrounding contexts, but also with subject and sentence focus.

- The paratactic predicate encodes important events making up the major story line in the **foreground**. The constituent before the clause boundary rather than the subject of the clause serves as topic, which might be unexpected, new or contrastive with respect to the state of affairs.

K O M N I

- a. *Canonical predicate*
- váa-wá sòó!min, 3sg have-FM rabbit 'She has a rabbit.'
- b. *Hypotactic predicate*
- hògò wòni ànàŋ ò bállí bàtá bé-né, woman one with 3sg children three be:LOC-NA 'There was a woman with her three children.'
- c. *Paratactic predicate*
- Mother told me to sweep the room, mìn sààrì-kà, 1sg:H sweep-3sg and I swept it.

B L I

- a. *Canonical predicate*
- níðáwá ðìq ká jèntá, man:DEF cook FM soup 'The man cooked soup.'
- b. *Hypotactic predicate*
- níðáa dàán lè bórò, àlè wá pòòbá bàni, man past CNJ be:LOC with 3sg women five 'There was a man with five wives.'
- c. *Paratactic predicate*
- ... the youngest child brought the tomatoes home lè wá ðìq, CNJ 3sg cook and she [the mother] cooked them.

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.