Discourse Structure and Information Packaging
in Cross-Linguistic Perspective

Svetlana Petrova

Anne Schwarz

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. categorical kind. A problem apparently arises with **V/1-sentences** containing **discourse-given** referents:
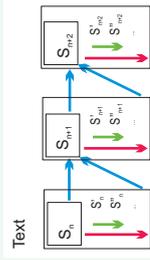
Distribution of V/1-patterns in Early Germanic

- text-initial sentences and episode onsets = **new text sequence**

(1) Lat. **Factum est** autem In diebus illis'
    OHG **uuard** thô gitân In then tagon (T 35, 7)
    [It] happened in those days

- verb groups:

(2) Lat. & ecce angelus domini
    OHG **quam** thara gotes engil (T 35, 32)
    There appeared God's angel

(3) Lat. **credidit** homo semoni
    OHG **gilouta** ther man themo uuorte (T 90, 24)
    The man believed (=started to believe) to this statement

(4) Lat. & respondens angelus
    OHG **antlingota** tho ther engil (T 28, 26)
    Then the angel responded

- special cases

- highlighting of important events: V/1 forces all-focus interpretation

(5) OS a. Than **uuas** thar en gigamalod mann./ b. that **uuas** froud gomo […] c. That **uuas** so salig man/ […] d. **Uuas** im thoh an sorogon hugi./ that sea erbiuuard egan ni moustun (Hel 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

(6) ON þá var fjorðinn fullr af veiðiskap, ok **gáðu** þeir eigi fyrir veiðum at fá heyanna ok **dó** alt kvikfé þeira um vetrinn. (Landnámabók 5)
    There was the ford full of fish, and because of the fishing they didn't care to get hay, and all their cattle died in the winter

- chains of narrative sequences ('periods')

Proposal

verb placement indicates rhetorical relations in Early Germanic

- V/2 indicates subordination and continuation; here Vfin separates a topic from the comment/new-information focus

- V/1 indicates coordination/ the end of a chain of continuation; no topic-comment structure applies

Text

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

- **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

Narration: 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.

Morphosyntactic Variation in Gur (B1)

State of affairs

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

[+ topical subject]:

a. **canonical predicate:** SV(O) categorical utterance with topic + comment

[- topical subject]:

b. **hypotactic predicate (incorporation):** SV(O) thetic utterance without topic

c. **paratactic predicate (coordination):** O#SV topic + clausal comment

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 categorical configuration occurs in morphosyntactically marked constructions in which the predicate is either hypotactically (b) or paratactically (c) encoded.

- 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.

Empirical evidence

a. *Canonical predicate*
   - verb tone paradigm α
   - postverbal focus marker

b. *Hypotactic predicate*
   - verb tone paradigm β
   - Buli: conjunction LE
   - Konni: verb suffix -NA
   - Dagbani: preverbal N-

c. *Paratic predicate*
   - verb tone paradigm γ
   - Buli: conjunction TE
   - Konni: pronominal form (postnominal DI)
   - Dagbani: conjunction KA

BULI

a. *Canonical predicate*

  nídsáwá díŋ kā jèntá.
  man.DEF cook FM soup
  The man cooked soup.

b. *Hypotactic predicate*

  nídsã dáàn lè bòrò, àlè wã pòóbã bànù.
  man past CNJ be:LOC with 3sg women five
  There was a man with five wives.

c. *Paratactic predicate*

  tè wà díŋ.
  CNJ 3sg cook
  and she [the mother] cooked them.

KONNI

a. *Canonical predicate*

  ò yàà-wá sóálmíŋ.
  3sg have-FM rabbit
  She has a rabbit.

b. *Hypotactic predicate*

  hʊ̀gʊ́ wʊ̀ŋí aŋán ò báĺì bàtà bé-nè.
  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,

  mán sáàrì-kà.
  1sg:H sweep-3sg
  and I swept it.

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 Konni
- cf. additional continuous "aspect" by preverbal N- within Oti-Volta language group

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.

Asher, Nicolas & Lascarides, Alex. 2003. *Logics of Conversation. Cambridge University Press.*
Fiedler, Ines & Anne Schwarz, to appear. Focus or Narrative Construction? In Aboh, E., K. Hartmann & M. Zimmermann (eds.), *Focus Strategies: Evidence from African Languages*, Berlin: de Gruyter.
Hinterhölzl, Roland, Svetlana Petrova & Michael Solf. 2005. Diskurspragmatische Faktoren für Topikalität und

Verbstellung in der althochdeutschen Tatianübersetzung (9.-Jh.) In: Ishihara, S., M. Schmitz and A. Schwarz (eds.), *Subject and topic*, Studies on Information Structure 3, 143–182.
Hopper, Paul J. 1979. Aspect and Foregrounding in Discourse. In Talmy Givón (ed) *Syntax and Semantics*, New York: Academic Press, 213–241.

Li, Charles N., and Sandra A. Thompson. 1976. Subject and Topic: A New Typology of Language. In Li, Charles N. (ed.), *Subject and topic*, New York/San Francisco/London: Academic Press, 457–489.
Mann, William C. & Thompson, Sandra A. 1988. Rhetorical Structure Theory: Toward a functional theory of text organization. In *TEXT. An interdisciplinary journal for the study of discourse* 8, 243–281.