The comparative evolution of word order in French and English

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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 created 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 French, with particular emphasis on comparing this development to the parallel loss of V2 in English. In some ways, the developments in the two languages look remarkably alike. For instance, in both there is a steep decline of direct object topicalization that accompanies the loss of V2 word order. 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. The MCVF corpus reveals an even greater decline between Old and Middle French. At the same time, the frequency of PP and adverb fronting remains largely constant in both languages. A 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 different trajectory in the two languages, in part because the grammatical starting point for the change was quite different in the two cases. Old English was not a canonical V2 language and did not exhibit V-to-C movement in topicalized sentences (Haeberli 2002; Pintzuk 1991, 1993). Verb-second surface word order was not forced by any grammatical requirement but rather reflected 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 1987a, 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 that had favored 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 greatly restricted (Vance 1997); but the use of the low subject position remained robust, leaving Middle French with a grammar similar to that of Old English. It is then surprising that the frequency of object topicalization in Middle French should have been as low as it was. In Old English, after all, the frequency was quite high. If French had truly followed the English parallel, it should have maintained a high frequency of object topicalization until modern times, the period when its use of the low subject position became restricted. The best explanation for the drop in frequency of topicalization in French turns out to be the change in accentuation that philologists have argued French underwent (see the discussion in Adams 1987b). This change greatly restricted phrasal accents at the left edge of an utterance, making the normal double accentuation of most topicalized sentences impossible and eliminating the information-structural motivation for movement of a topicalized argument to the left edge of a matrix clause. In modern spoken French, the loss of topicalization is compensated by the extensive use of clitic left- and right-dislocation, as well as it-clefting and other constructions, but these constructions have always been to a considerable extent avoided in writing, making detection of the substitution difficult. Nonetheless, it is possible to show that these alternatives do increase in frequency over time and thereby to support our prosody-based account.

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