Genuine Topic Verb-Second Structures in Old English

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The Verb Second Constraint in Old English

In Old (OE) the finite verb (V*fin*) is placed in a high verb position only in a limited number of contexts: direct questions (categorically)(1), after adverbs like *nu* 'now', *swa* 'so', *þa / þonne* 'then' (2), and in some verb-initial clauses (regularly) (3), as is evidenced by the position of subject pronouns (spro) immediately below V*fin*.

(1)   Hwæt [cwæþ   [he   [to hire]]]
        what   said   he   to her
        'What did he say to her'   (coblick, BlHom_1:3.13.14)

(2)   Þa [cwædon [hi   [ealle...]]]
          then   said   they   all...
          'Then they all said...'   (coaelhom, ÆHom_22:391.3509)

(3)   [Cwædon [heo [to him, "..."]]]
               said   she to him, "..."
          'She said to him, "..."'   (cobede,Bede_2:2.100.24.945)

After initial topics, however, V*fin* stays in a lower verb position (Kemenade 1987, Pintzuk 1999, Haeberli 2000)

(4)   [þis [... [he [cwæð mid siccetunge ...]]]]   (<---- normal word order)
          this   he   said   with sighing
           'He said this with a sigh'   (coaelhom,ÆHom_27:97.3983)

However, very rarely, the verb occurs in the high verb position even with topics. I refer to such constructions as "genuine Topic V2".

(5)   [Of þam heofonlican leohte [ne   beo   [ge [afyrhte]]].   (<---- very rare)
            of the heavenly   light   NEG   be.sbjctv   you   afraid
           'You should not be afraid of the heavenly light'   (coaelive, ÆLS_[Vincent]:197.7923)

In this talk, I will investigate the diachronic development of genuine Topic V2 during the OE period.

Variable Rules Analysis of V2 structures

The dependent variable is the presence or absence of spro-V*fin* inversion. Independent variables considered are (i) three OE periods, (ii) main or conjunct clause (iii) initial adverb, V1 or initial topic, (iv) indicative or subjunctive mood, (v) presence or absence of negation.

Total N= 22,062	Factor weight	% of inversion	Corrected mean: 0.093 N
Clause type			
main	0.704	34.7	13685
conjoined main	0.148	3.1	6774
RANGE	*56*		
Mood			
indicative	0.468	24.9	19716
subjunctive	0.968	69.3	743
RANGE	*50*		
Negation			
negated finite verb	0.920	52.1	2697
positive finite verb	0.408	19.6	17762
RANGE	*51*		
Adverb			
initial adverb	0.923	64.3	4934
no initial constituent	0.346	12.7	13447
initial topic	0.144	3.9	2078
RANGE	*78*		
Period			
early	0.581	34.8	6034
late	0.547	28.3	4925
Aelfric	0.424	15.4	9500
RANGE	*16*		

Table 1. Factors significant to the occurrence of inversion of pronominal subject – finite verb in Old English.

inversion of V*fin* and spro is significantly more frequent for:

- main clauses > conjoined clauses

- subjunctive > indicative mood

- negation > absence of negation

- initial adverb > V1 > initial topic

- early OE > late OE > Ælfric

(1) Decline of high verb position. (2) However, no coherent development for genuine Topic V2.

Explanation: Independent Topicalization and Verb Placement Rules

I   there is an independent topicalization rule in OE, which puts a topic into the XP-position

II   there is also an independent rule for placement of V*fin* in the high verb position if it is negated and / or subjunctive

→   Genuine Topic V2 is "accidental". It occurs when both rules I and II are applied

→   Hypotheses:

(a) No genuine Topic V2 Structures with positive, indicative verb

(b) predictability from frequencies of topicalization and high verb placement

Topic		Verb Type		
		negative	positive subjunctive / ambiguous mood	positive indicative
Complement	accusative NP	6	5	0
	dative NP	1	0	0
	genitive NP	2	0	0
	PP	4	4	0
	TOTAL	13	9	0
Adjunct	temporal PP	5	11	13
	locative PP	4	1	0
	other PP	8	7	3
	heavy AdvP	3	3	0
	temporal NP	1	0	0
	TOTAL	21	22	16

Table 2: Genuine Topic V2 with pos.ind.Vfin

Period	Expected Genuine Topic V2	Observed Genuine Topic V2
Early OE	18	20
Late OE	30	30
Ælfric	27	31

Table 3: Expected and observed Topic V2

Conclusion:

Genuine Topic V2 structures neither increase nor decrease during the OE period. They are "accidental" constructions that come into being through topicalization and an independent rule for verb fronting to a high verb position.

References

Haeberli, E. (2000) 'Adjuncts and the Syntax of Subjects in Old and Middle English.' In: Pintzuk,S., Tsoulas,G. and Warner,A. (eds.) *Diachronic Syntax: Models and Mechanisms. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 109-131.*   **Kemenade, A. van**. (1987) *Syntactic case and morphological case in the history of English.* Dordrecht: Foris.   **Pintzuk, S**. (1999) *Phrase Structures in Competition: Variation and Change in Old English Word Order*. New York: Garland.