

OXFORD STUDIES IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH

INFORMATION STRUCTURE  
*and*  
SYNTACTIC CHANGE  
*in the*  
HISTORY OF ENGLISH

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*edited by*

ANNELI MEURMAN-SOLIN,  
MARÍA JOSÉ LÓPEZ-COUSO,  
*and* BETTELOU LOS



# Information Structure and Syntactic Change in the History of English

OXFORD STUDIES IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH

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*Information Structure and Syntactic Change in the History of English*

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María José López-Couso,  
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Bettelou Los

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## PREFACE

This volume is a compilation of articles investigating how the interaction between syntax and information structure led to change in the history of English. The topics are explored from a wide range of theoretical and methodological perspectives, including formal syntactic theory, discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, and language typology. Most of the studies exploit quantitatively and qualitatively representative digital corpora. The volume draws on cooperation between scholars chiefly active in the field of English historical linguistics, a forum for which was created at the initiative of María José López-Couso and Anneli Meurman-Solin in organizing the Workshop Information Structure and Syntactic Change at the 15th International Conference on English Historical Linguistics held in Munich, Germany, in August 2008. Beside chapters developed from papers presented at the workshop, there are also contributions by scholars invited by the editors to join the project.

Our deepest debt of gratitude is to the authors of the various chapters, who, with their excellent contributions and their unfailing cooperation, have made this volume a reality. We are also greatly indebted to the following colleagues, who acted as external reviewers at various stages in the preparation of this volume: Sylvia Adamson, Kristin Bech, Linda van Bergen, Betty Birner, Tine Breban, Laurel Brinton, Kristin Davidse, Olga Fischer, Dolores González-Álvarez, Jeanette Gundel, Eric Haeberli, Roland Hinterhölzl, Thomas Kohnen, Christian Mair, Belén Méndez-Naya, Robert McColl Millar, Svetlana Petrova, Harm Pinkster, Jan Rijkhoff, Leah Roberts, Elizabeth Closs Traugott, Carola Trips, Tuija Virtanen, Gregory Ward, Anthony Warner, Johanna L. Wood, Wim van der Wurff, and, in particular, Ursula Lenker and an anonymous referee, who reviewed the whole manuscript of the volume and from whose very valuable comments both the editors and the authors have benefited greatly.

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# Information Structure and Syntactic Change in the History of English

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## CHAPTER 1

# On the Interplay of Syntax and Information Structure

### *Synchronic and Diachronic Considerations*

BETTELOU LOS, MARÍA JOSÉ LÓPEZ-COUSO,  
AND ANNELI MEURMAN-SOLIN

## 1.1 INFORMATION STRUCTURE: DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

Information structure is a relatively new field that developed as a subfield of the study of pragmatics. Early landmark publications include the work by Prince in the *Journal of Pragmatics* (Prince 1985), and monographs by Lambrecht (1994) and Birner and Ward (1998). The importance of information structure has been recognized relatively quickly, as can be gauged from the fact that *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (2002), edited by Huddleston and Pullum, devotes an entire chapter, “Information Packaging” (by Birner & Ward), to noncanonical word orders that serve a particular information structural purpose. The value of information structure in accounting for word order variation in English is also clear from studies of the dative alternation, as in (1); the order as in (1a) favors definite direct objects (*the book*), whereas the order as in (1b) favors indefinite objects (*a book*):

- (1) a. He gave the book to John  
b. He gave John a book

This alternation in Present-Day English has been shown to be sensitive to its constituents’ pronominality, weight, and information structure (Bresnan et al. 2007). The particle alternation illustrated in (2) is sensitive to information structure:

- (2) a. He carried out the instructions  
b. He carried the instructions out



Where there is alternation (i.e., when idiomatic phrasal verb combinations that only allow one of the two orders are excluded), the constituents' pronominality, weight, and information structure all play a role (Biber et al. 1999: 932–5, Dehé 2002).

The proliferation of terms and definitions (“Given” and “New,” topic and comment, topic and focus, background and focus, theme and rheme, presupposed and pragmatically unrecoverable) similarly mark information structure as a relatively recently developed field. Although there is a considerable area of overlap, these terms are still all useful in that they do not necessarily refer to quite the same things (see e.g. the discussion of the various issues in Kruijff-Korbayová & Steedman 2003, especially their figure 1). This introduction will use the terms “Given” and “New” with the proviso that they refer very broadly to information that is known or presupposed and pragmatically unrecoverable, respectively. The notion “New” in particular is not a primitive of information structure theory but allows further breakdown into whether the information is discourse-new or addressee-new, which is why Lambrecht (1994) prefers the term “pragmatically unrecoverable.” Lambrecht points out that objects can refer to entities that have already been mentioned in the discourse, but will still be “New” in the sense that their association with a particular topic is new.

Topics, or more precisely aboutness-topics, are defined by Gundel (1988: 210) as follows: “An entity E is the topic of a sentence, S, if in using S the speaker intends to increase the addressee’s knowledge about, request information about, or otherwise get the addressee to act with respect to E.” This notion of topic is the same as Reinhart’s (1981), who compares the way new information is presented to a file card system, with topics as the file cards that bear particular headings. Although topics tend to be “Given,” they do not have to be. Clauses may introduce a new entity into the discourse and establish it as topic at the same time—as is done in (3) with *a good friend of mine*:

- (3) [A good friend of mine]<sub>Topic</sub> [married Britney Spears last year]<sub>Comment</sub> (Krifka 2007: 42)

Although (3) shows that “New” topics are perfectly acceptable, data from spoken corpora show that the combination of Newness and topichood may be less felicitous in conversation, where Left Dislocation is often used as a topic promotion device, a way to introduce or reactivate topics, as noted by Gregory and Michaelis (2001). This is illustrated by example (4), where the left-dislocated constituent in A.37 utt2 is given in italics.

- (4) B.34 utt3: they give each candidate perhaps, {D you know,} ten second blurbs in which  
[to, + {D you know,} to] say, [you, + you] just can’t get a full picture of,  
{D you know}—  
A.35 utt1: Right. /  
B.36 utt1: —their message unless you have time to sit down [and r-, + and probably  
read] something on it. /  
A.37 utt1: Right. /  
A.37 utt2: {C And} *the news, too*, it just doesn’t, {F um,} cover that many stories, /  
A.37 utt3: {E I mean,} it just covers your basic, {D you know,} violent crimes—  
(*Switchboard Corpus*, Preliminary version, 1995 University of Pennsylvania;  
file 4033\_1501\_1537, date 920302)

Prototypically, “New” information is presented as comment, that is, says something about the topic, and appears at the end or toward the end of the clause (“end focus”). We

will use the term “focus” for constituents that are “highlighted” in some way; such highlighting is accomplished in English by prosodic or syntactic marking (clefts). The effect of such marking includes meanings of contrast and exhaustive identification. Krifka (2007) argues that the most cogent generalization underlying the various types of focus is that focus always indicates the presence of alternatives. He gives (5) as an example:

(5) A: What do your siblings do?

B: [My [SISter]<sub>Focus</sub>]<sub>Topic</sub> [studies MEDicine]<sub>Focus</sub>, and [my [BROther]<sub>Focus</sub>]<sub>Topic</sub> is [working on a FREIGHT ship]<sub>Focus</sub>  
(Krifka 2007: 44)

In the first clause of B’s response in (5), focus on *sister* indicates an alternative to the topic “my sister,” namely “my brother,” and this prosodic marking is used by the speaker as a signal to the hearer that the answer is not finished with the first topic (the sister) but will also include information on another topic (the brother) (Krifka 2007: 44). Such a definition of focus is useful because there is some terminological confusion about focus-marked constituents that are also topics, like the topicalized object *Baseball* in (6):

(6) G: Do you watch football?

E. Yeah. Baseball I like a lot better (Birner & Ward 1998: 38)

Birner and Ward (1998) note that the contrast could be described as an evocation of partially ordered sets: the earlier mention of football evokes the category of sports. All the examples of fronted objects in their corpus appear to evoke partially ordered sets and hence are “Given” in this sense, rather than “New.” Such objects are sometimes classified as focal (“contrastive focus,” see e.g. Steedman 2000, van Hoof 2003), whereas on other occasions the term “topic” is preferred for this function because the items tend to be definite and “Given” (e.g. Bouma 2008); Krifka’s label “focused topics” has the virtue of combining both these aspects.

A central concern of information structure theory is partitioning “Given” from “New” information, although views differ as to whether this partitioning is (mildly) recursive or not: does it only take place at clause level or also at sentence level (see again Kruijff-Korbayová & Steedman 2003: 251 for an overview of the various positions)? The general consensus seems to be that information structure is sentence-internal and its locus of investigation is the clause, or rather the sentence, as adverbial clauses like those introduced by *since*, *seeing*, *considering*, and the like in their entirety seem to be topic-forming or topic-introducing devices. Discourse structure, on the other hand, investigates patterns of cohesion in larger stretches than a single sentence. However, we would like to stress that further research is required to identify what constitutes the appropriate unit for analyzing information structure in various registers in earlier stages of English. In historical texts, especially in certain registers and in particular periods, the grammar is not based on sentence and clause structure in any straightforward way, which justifies taking “utterance” as the structural unit for which information structure is relevant (see Meurman-Solin, this volume). Moreover, information structure does not reduce to a lining up of “Given” vis-à-vis “New,” but also involves what Lambrecht (1994: 94–6) terms “activation states of discourse referents”: the question of which element ends up in focus position is also a mechanism by which topic discontinuities can be realigned

(Lambrecht 1994: 325). As activation status and accessibility of referents require information from the level of discourse, the borderline between information structure and discourse structure is very fuzzy indeed.

Information-structural cues like focus similarly extend beyond the level of a single clause, which is why Krifka (2007) introduces “Common Ground content” and “Common Ground management” as distinct notions. The partitioning of “Given” and “New” relies on knowledge of the Common Ground content, and could be argued to be clausal. Example (5) updates the Common Ground content with the information about the occupations of the addressee’s siblings by positioning that information in the end focus position. The manipulation of the hearer’s expectations, part of the Common Ground management, is more likely to transcend the level of the clause. The *raison d’être* of the contrastive focus intonation of *my sister* in interlocutor B’s first clause is not so much to signal Common Ground content, but Common Ground management: it signals the beginning of a list, indicating that B is claiming the floor for a lengthy turn spanning more than one clause.

## 1.2 WHAT THE STUDY OF SYNTACTIC CHANGE CAN TELL US ABOUT INFORMATION STRUCTURE AND VICE VERSA

As syntax is also sentence-based, the relationship between information structure and syntax is an important issue. Given the oral modality of speech, words have to be lined up linearly to be produced by the speaker, and reconstituted into constituents to be processed by the hearer. Syntax provides automatic routines to deal with this packing and unpacking, providing a template for ordering “Given” and “New” information, to accommodate the communicative needs of speaker and hearer in speech, and those of author and reader in written discourse. This does not mean that information structure maps onto syntax in any direct way, nor that syntax is the only level of description that is relevant to information structure. Information structure interacts with almost every other linguistic level (morphology, prosody, semantics, pragmatics), and one of the challenges of future research is to disentangle “which comes first” in the production of an utterance. The interaction between the various levels can be assumed to vary, depending on how rigid the syntactic, morphological, prosodic, semantic, or pragmatic templates are, and this appears to be language-specific, and hence can also be specific to a particular phase in the history of a language, as the synchronic variation that we find crosslinguistically also defines the variation that is possible diachronically, that is, between different stages of the same language. This means that the templates can be assumed to be different in the various time periods.

Although French and English both have fairly rigid syntactic templates, prosodic and intonational phrasing can overrule the tendency for English to prefer “Given” information to be encoded by subjects (Lambrecht 1994: 14–24):

(7) My car broke down

(8) Her father died

In the given context of (7), as an apologetic comment of a speaker who is trying to get herself and an extraordinary amount of shopping onto a crowded bus, Lambrecht notes

that the subject *my car* does not correspond to an aboutness-topic at the level of the pragmatically structured proposition, but the speaker herself is topic. Topic is here not coded as subject, but as the determiner *my* inside the subject NP. Sentence accent falls on *car* and marks it as focus rather than topic, so that prosody can here be said to overrule the default (syntactic) position for such constituents, which would be clause-final (end focus). Such prosodic focusing is not possible in French; the French equivalents of (7)–(8) have to resort to a syntactic mechanism (clefting) that positions the focused elements in the syntactic (predicate-)focus position, that is, in end focus. Information structure is only one of the factors influencing prosodic and intonational phrasing (morphosyntactic structure and phonological length also play a role), and the details of their interaction are language-specific rather than universal (Selkirk 1984, Gussenhoven 2004).

Lambrecht suggests that diachronic investigations might reveal much about how all these systems develop (Lambrecht 1994: 28–9), and hence throw light on how these linguistic levels interact. Unlike investigations into synchronic variation, which need not concern themselves with how such variation develops but can be content to chart it and model it, investigations into diachronic variation are more constrained. Modeling the variation exhibited by the various stages of the language is not enough: diachronic studies also have to find plausible scenarios for how one stage develops into the next (the mechanisms of change), and, if possible, why there was such a change (whether it was the result of language-internal developments or language-external ones, like language or dialect contact, or both). In this respect, historical linguistics, with its need for plausible scenarios, may serve as a kind of touchstone for linguistic theories. If we find that subjects are increasingly limited to encoding “Given” information, such a change might be argued to be information-structure driven, given the universal tendency of ordering “Given” before “New.” Such a scenario is only plausible, however, with grammars that have high rates of subjects as the first constituent of the clause, because we would need a subject-first ordering as a precondition for such pairing of subject with “Given” information. In this case it could be argued that the syntactic change (a change in the rates of subject-first) came first. Other scenarios that might be envisaged are cases in which changes in syntax compromise the requirements of information structure, with the syntactic “corset” (as Wiese, Freywald & Mayr 2009 put it) becoming so restrictive that new constructions, like clefts, emerge to remedy the situation. Such diachronic scenarios suggest that syntax and information structure are autonomous.

The autonomy of syntax and information structure has important repercussions both for syntactic modeling and for ideas about which order can be taken as basic for a language. There are claims that SVO should be regarded as the basic order of all languages (following Kayne 1994), which would mean that OV orders are always derived rather than basic. For languages like Japanese or German, traditionally labeled OV, this would mean that the “canonical” OV order is derived—which would mean that the notion “derived” is meaningless, as it cannot serve to distinguish canonical OV orders from non-canonical OV orders, like “scrambling,” by which “Given” objects can be moved to a position earlier in the clause. There are models that integrate information structure into the syntax by positing Focus Phrases and Topic Phrases. Such models explain the word order optionality that is utilized by information structure for its own purposes in terms of features. In our earlier example of the dative alternation in (1), for instance, the object

that is “Given” (*the book* in (1a), *John* in (1b)) scrambles to an earlier position in the clause because an information-structural feature in the functional head of that position attracts it to its specifier (this is the so-called cartographic approach of Rizzi 1997). Such an integrated view of syntax and information structure does not have many insights to offer for the loss of, say, scrambling in English, because without any corroboration, “the feature for scrambling was lost” is little more than a restatement of “scrambling was lost.”

The logical consequence of keeping information structure and syntax apart is that we might need to rethink the relationship between frequency and underlying order (as pointed out by Fanselow 2003). Many formal analyses of the alternations as in (1) and (2), for instance, tend to take one of the orders as basic and the other as derived. If the syntax makes these orders available, but pragmatic considerations of weight and information structure constrain their use, the view that information structure and syntax constitute separate levels would mean that it will not necessarily follow that the most frequent order is the “basic” or “underlying” one (see Fanselow 2003). This is a strong hypothesis with important repercussions for investigations into word order change, with its emphasis on quantitative corpus data. This matter clearly has to be left to future research.

The late 1980s and 1990s saw major advances in the study of the diachronic syntax of English, most notably with the compilation of *The Helsinki Corpus of English Texts* and the *ARCHER Corpus*, which together cover the whole history of English from ca. 750 to the end of the twentieth century. Historical corpora of English correspondence and of Early Modern English trial transcripts and plays made it possible to investigate the differences between formal and less formal registers; see the *Corpus Resource Database* (<http://www.helsinki.fi/varieng/CoRD/corpora/index.html>) for details about corpora and availability. Many of these corpora have been morphologically and syntactically annotated, allowing more focused explorations into the syntax of earlier stages of English, in tandem with advances in formal syntactic theory about underlying structures. While the work done in this field uncovered a number of broad patterns, there remained a sizeable area of syntactic variation that could not be pinpointed to either particular areal and regional varieties or particular periods. Nevertheless, it was possible to see clear trends in diminishing frequencies for some basic orders like verb-second as the Early Modern period approached, as well as in the dramatic rise of new developments like *do*-support and the establishment of auxiliaries as a separate class. There was a growing awareness that much of the syntactic variation recorded was possibly not (only) a matter of competing grammars, but might be motivated by information-structure considerations.

Some orders may be motivated by information structure at an early period, but become syntacticized at a later stage; and, conversely, some orders may be syntactically motivated earlier but acquire an information structure or discourse motivation later—especially when they have become minority, noncanonical orders because of syntactic change. The vagaries of the rule of verb-second in the history of English are a good example. The verb-second rule itself is an innovation in early Germanic (Eythórrson 1995), most likely to satisfy information-structural needs. It is a common finding that subclauses tend to preserve older orders, whereas main clauses tend to innovate: main clauses have to satisfy various communicative requirements, the positioning of focus and discourse-old or discourse-new material, and they therefore tend to develop special constructions not found in subclauses (see Bybee 2001). The canonical order in early

Germanic appears to have been SOV; verb-second may have been an optional rule at first, to draw attention to the special information-structural status of the first constituent; the finite verb was in effect a focus marker, partitioning off a privileged focus position, as it still is in Hungarian (Comrie 1989: 63). Verb-second then became entrenched as a syntactic rather than a stylistic or pragmatic device. Once verb-second order had acquired the status of canonical main clause order (in Old English), main clauses without verb movement (i.e., SOV main clause orders) became noncanonical, a minority pattern that was open to reinterpretation as a discourse marker (see Bech, this volume). When verb-second declined as a canonical order in Middle English, its decline revealed a stage in which speakers had apparently reinterpreted its trigger as pragmatic rather than syntactic (van Kemenade & Westergaard, this volume). It briefly reappeared in Early Modern English with a discourse function (it signals a conclusion after a series of argumentative points; Fludernik 1996: 593).

The investigation into the loss of OV orders in Late Old English and Early Middle English similarly benefits from an awareness of information structure as a possible trigger. Earlier work accounted for the variation by proposing a derivational analysis for these orders that was equally “costly” (van der Wurff 1997); end-weight (as measured by object length in words), that is, heavy NP shift, as a motivation of some of the VO orders (Pintzuk & Kroch 1989); geographical or dialectal factors (with the change to VO turning out to be slower in the south; Kroch & Taylor 2000); and object type (quantified or negated objects are found more frequently in OV; Ingham 2000, Pintzuk & Taylor 2006) as a motivation for some of the OV orders. Each of these factors can of course be expected to become more, or less, relevant or significant as OV orders decline further.

The impact of discourse structure and information structure as a factor in the selection of VO or OV orders is only just beginning to be examined. Taylor and Pintzuk (this volume) study motivations for VO in Old English and find that there is a significant correlation between object position and information status in that “New” objects are significantly more frequent in VO order, although weight also plays a role. As VO orders become more canonical (syntactic), the role of information status declines and “Given” objects increasingly appear in postverbal position. Teeuw (2009) investigates motivations for OV orders in Early Middle English and demonstrates that a text with relatively high rates of OV (the southern *Vices and Virtues*, ca. 1200) shows a significant correlation between OV and discourse-old objects: 41% of subordinate clauses exhibit OV order, and 88% of the objects in those clauses are anaphoric (mainly demonstratives). These rates are much lower for Middle English texts that have lower rates of OV orders, that is, where the change of OV to VO has progressed further than in *Vices and Virtues*.

These results are open to a number of different interpretations. One way of making sense of them is that neither OV nor VO are canonical in Old English, so that the selection of one over the other can be triggered by information-structural considerations: in this particular area, information structure and syntax fit each other like a hand in a glove. VO orders become canonical in Late Old English, and information structure no longer plays an important role. The *Vices and Virtues* text in Teeuw’s (2009) study could either represent a conservative dialect that continues the Old English situation (with OV/VO orders determined by information structure) or, alternatively, a system that has reinterpreted relic OV orders (once VO order became canonical) as having a pragmatic



motivation. The nature of the objects found in OV seems to suggest the latter scenario: there are high rates of strong (*this, these*) demonstratives in these “Given” objects in OV orders and far lower rates of weak (*the, that*) demonstratives, which seems to indicate that the preverbal position has been reinterpreted as a position for objects that refer back to specific entities in the earlier discourse. A lot more work needs to be done, however.

### 1.3 CHALLENGES OF RESEARCH INTO DISCOURSE AND INFORMATION STRUCTURE

The study of information structure in older stages of a language is not easy. There is no access to native speaker judgments or psycholinguistic experiments; and the data may present the usual pitfalls of being translations, copies from later periods or from other areas, and so on. Nevertheless, we do have large quantities of qualitatively representative digital (and annotated) data, especially from the Early Modern English period. Although shortcuts are available in that tagged and parsed corpora will yield quantitative evidence of a number of features, like definiteness or indefiniteness of subjects or objects, the data that we need from discourse structure in order to make generalizations about information structure in any given period require a further investment in annotating and enriching existing corpora with referential information, an area in which work has only recently been started. We will discuss two particularly challenging questions in more detail.

The first problem is that the development of written as opposed to spoken styles may obscure important patterns. Research into oral speech styles demonstrates how much certain phenomena in older texts derive from characteristics of preliterate oral texts, and can be explained by them: strings of loosely connected main clauses with little embedding, particles whose functions are difficult to identify, unwarranted repetitions, unexpected resumptive pronouns, left dislocations, and inconsistent (to a modern eye) use of tenses, all those linguistic aspects of early texts that tend to be so “disconcerting” (Fleischman 1990: 23) to us modern readers, steeped as we are in written culture. Studies of oral versus literate strategies suggest that in literate traditions “the meaning is in the text,” in the actual written words, while in oral situations “the meaning is in the context” and in the implications of communicative acts (Fleischman 1990: 22, quoting Goody & Watt 1968; see also Olson 1977, Bauman 1986). Literate traditions develop a “grammar of prose” (Perret 1988), stylistic conventions in writing. When speakers have become authors and hearers readers, such conventions compensate for the loss of prosody and intonation to achieve communicative purposes. One could argue that this development led to tighter syntactic restrictions on what elements can be ellipted, and a greater reliance on special syntactic constructions like clefts or passives to meet information-structural needs that might have been met by prosodic means in oral styles (see Pérez-Guerra, this volume, for changes in syntactic constructions in Early Modern English). Other conventions developed as the result of explicitly formulated views. Lenker’s (2010) excellent, detailed study of the development of written rhetorical styles in the history of English charts the development of new written styles once English had reestablished itself as a language that was also suited to the more elevated modes of discourse, in Middle English and Early Modern English. Writers expressed explicit views

on style, leading to the development of a consensus about the conventions of the various genres, and ideas about appropriate registers for certain discourse domains, throughout the Early Modern period. She also shows how these developments were reflected in syntactic change, with adverbial connectors and logical linkers shifting from clause-initial to clause-medial position (Lenker 2010: 233–46). The study of Early Modern English correspondence by Meurman-Solin (this volume) is a salutary reminder, however, that such written conventions did not develop overnight, and demonstrates that it is possible to identify systematicity and converging trends even in “disconcerting” registers and genres like private letters.

The development of such a grammar of prose depends on the development of a written culture, which in turn depends on rates of literacy and the availability of texts. The West-Saxon *Schriftsprache* of the Old English period shows a development beyond the oral mode, but this style is lost when French becomes dominant after the Norman Conquest. France remains a dominant force in cultural and intellectual pursuits throughout the Middle Ages, not just in post-Conquest England but in Europe more generally; and Latin long remains the language of academic discourse. Higher rates of literacy and the growth of urban centers made printing economically feasible; William Caxton set up the first printing press in England in Westminster in 1476. In time, the advent of printing led to more cheaply produced and therefore more widely accessible texts, further accelerating rates of literacy.

As historical data are written data, such a divergence between written and oral styles may lead to misleading results: we might interpret changes we find in the mapping of syntax and information structure in Early Modern English as a diachronic development instead of as the result of a stylistic phenomenon. Synchronic data may help: the stressed-focus *it*-cleft, a new development in Late Middle English and Early Modern English (Ball 1991), has been shown to be closely associated with formal written styles rather than colloquial speech, a situation that is the mirror image of the reversed *wh*-cleft (Biber et al. 1999: 961)—and there seems to be some overlap in function; witness (9a), with *it*-cleft, and (9b), with reversed *wh*-cleft:

- (9) Edith Cavell returned home in 1895 to look after her ailing father.  
 a. It was then that she discovered her vocation: nursing.  
 b. That was when she discovered her vocation: nursing.

Conversely, some phenomena are rare even in spoken corpora, although native speaker judgments may confirm that they are not at all marginal but completely acceptable. This is the case with topicalized objects in Dutch. Topicalized objects are syntactically very much a minority pattern, although much more frequent in Dutch than in Present-Day English. The great majority of such objects represent “Given” information in Dutch, although they may also host completely “New” information. An example is (10), where the object is not contrastive in any way:

- (10) Twee kindjes heeft ze.  
 two children has she  
 ‘She has got two children.’ (Bouma 2008: 114)

Completely “New” topicalized objects, therefore, represent a minority of a minority and accordingly have very low rates of occurrence, even in spoken corpora. Fronted objects



may also represent “New” information in German (see e.g. Bohnacker & Rosén 2007). Speyer (2007, 2008) noted far higher rates of brand-new objects in his Modern German corpus than Bouma’s rates for Dutch. In Present-Day English, by contrast, completely “New” topicalized objects do not seem possible—they are not attested in Birner and Ward’s corpus (Birner & Ward 1998), and native speaker judgments confirm that they are unacceptable: *\*Two children she has got*, a fact which was used to comic effect in the *Star Wars* movies (Yoda’s language; see Pullum 2005). This means that we have to be careful about how we interpret low frequencies of information-structural patterns in historical corpora.

Finally, synchronic corpus investigations show that discourse and information structure patterns are difficult to quantify to a satisfactory level of significance because they tend to be options rather than absolutes. Gregory and Michaelis (2001) argue convincingly that one of the functions of Left Dislocation in Present-Day English is topic promotion (as in (4) above, which we have taken from the same corpus of spoken English they used). A diagnostic that could be used to argue that a discourse referent has become topic is topic persistence: is the entity that is introduced by Left Dislocation the topic of the next stretch of discourse? The fairly low incidence of topic persistence found by Gregory and Michaelis, however, does not invalidate their claim that Left Dislocation is a topic promotion device: a speaker can introduce a topic by Left Dislocation, but may not have very much to say about it, or the hearer may fail to continue the same topic, and so on (Gregory & Michaelis 2001: 1693).

Such problems of interpretation of corpus data are even greater in the absence of native speaker judgments; Bech (this volume) shows how difficult it is to validate a hypothesis about the pragmatic function of a syntactic pattern in an Old English text. The well-known failure of verb movement in second conjuncts of two coordinated main clauses could be a cue to the hearer or reader that the narrative has momentarily left its steady progression of foregrounded events and is dealing with a subevent first, but we should not expect to find a hundred per cent match for such discourse markers.

In spite of such problems and caveats, however, recent work like Hinterhölzl (2009) about diachronic Germanic syntax shows that it is possible to study discourse and information structure in earlier languages, and that such investigations can yield important insights. This is confirmed by the studies in this volume.

## 1.4 OVERVIEW OF THE THEMES IN THIS VOLUME

This volume grew out of a collection of papers presented at the Workshop on Information Structure and Syntactic Change at the 15th International Conference on English Historical Linguistics held in Munich, Germany, in August 2008. The workshop invited scholars to present papers on topics related to the general theme, from any theoretical and methodological approach. The workshop had been inspired by a number of papers presented at an earlier workshop (Clausal Connectives in the History of English) at the 13th International Conference on English Historical Linguistics in Vienna, now published in the series *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory* by Benjamins (Lenker & Meurman-Solin 2007). Many of these papers, particularly those by Claridge, González-Cruz, and

Lenker, demonstrated that the history of connectives requires an understanding of the discourse factors that determine the position of subordinate clauses on both the local and the global levels of text.

This volume includes many of the original papers of the Munich workshop, supplemented by a number of additional articles from authors whom we invited to write about specific topics. Although the multiple authorship of the volume is evident (the methodologies used are quite different, and some chapters are more concerned with discourse and textual function, including genre, than with information structure in the stricter sense), the overall trends that emerge from these self-contained chapters on the role of information structure in syntactic change in the history of English are surprisingly coherent. In spite of all these different angles, the underlying message of the chapters is the same: when confronted with syntactic options in their data, speakers may converge on an information-structural or discourse motivation in selecting one of these options, on the basis of subtle differences in frequencies; and conversely, the lack of syntactic options may compromise information structure to the extent that certain syntactic patterns develop as “escape hatches.” Such motivations may belong to the domain of information structure in one period, but to discourse in the next, which is why the articles are not restricted to information structure only, but also include the analysis of discourse organization: information structure in the widest sense.

The volume opens with the chapter by Los, which discusses the consequences of the loss of the verb-second rule in Old English and Middle English for the organization of information in the clause. Los argues that verb-second had two motivations: (i) V-to-C, demarcating foci, which would include verb movement after first-position elements like question words, negation, and contrastively focused phrases, and (ii) V to a lower position than C, demarcating topics and other “Given” information from “New” information. There is overlap because topics can also be (contrastively) focused. “Given” information is just as likely to be encoded by an adverbial or an object as by a subject in such a system, which means that there is little one-to-one mapping of syntactic function to information status in Old English. With the loss of verb-second, and the later loss of V-to-I, the focusing function becomes more restricted, with some of the loss compensated for by the development of stressed-focus *it*-clefts. The second function, in which the finite verb marked off “Given” from “New,” also suffers because the pragmatic function of adverbials in first position becomes more restricted, with “Given” information increasingly encoded by subjects rather than adverbials. This scenario unites the themes of the chapters that follow.

The chapter by Taylor and Pintzuk demonstrates the syntactic flexibility of Old English in satisfying the requirements of information structure, with (at least) two positions for objects. There is a significant correlation between object position and information status in that “New” objects are significantly more frequent in VO order. This correlation declines over time, as VO order becomes more and more canonical. There are two important results here: (i) an awareness that information structure provides a motivation for the variation found in the earlier period and (ii) the finding that information structure can be used as a diagnostic for syntacticization: optional word orders become canonical.

Bech’s chapter is a reminder that verb-second was not completely canonical in Old English: it fails in some Old English main clauses. The clause-final position of these finite

verbs does not seem to be motivated by the syntax, which leads Bech to investigate the possibility of a discourse rather than a syntactic trigger. She tentatively identifies the failure of verb-second as a sign to the hearer or reader that the event is subordinated to the previous clause in the discourse structure, that is, represents a subevent rather than a new event in a straightforward narrative progression.

The decline of verb-second is examined in great detail in van Kemenade and Westergaard's contribution. They show by means of a study of children with Norwegian as first language that learners are very sensitive to information structure in their attempts to make sense of the syntactic patterns in their language, and they trace the patterns of the decline of verb-second in Middle English, in which we see subsequent generations making subtle reinterpretations of the information-structural properties of verb fronting.

Pérez-Guerra's chapter takes us to Early Modern English. The loss of verb-second reduces the options for positioning objects, which compromises information structure, with the result that noncanonical orders acquire specific information-structural functions. Those non-SVO patterns that still survive (as marked constructions) reflect this in that they function increasingly as escape hatches: special constructions to deal with subjects that are not "Given" (left dislocation and presentational *there*-constructions), and objects that are not "New" (topicalization).

The chapter by Seoane investigates the long passive (as in *John was arrested by the police*) in the same period, Early Modern English. With the subject increasingly identified as the default syntactic function for encoding "Given" information, and the clause-final position increasingly functioning as an end-focus position (cf. the nonoccurrence of sentences like (10) above in Present-Day English), we can hypothesize that the long passive becomes more frequent after the loss of verb-second. Like Taylor and Pintzuk's contribution, Seoane's chapter demonstrates the methodological problems of existing definitions and classifications of "Given" or "New" information status. Her quantitative study compares and evaluates two different notions of givenness in a historical corpus.

Meurman-Solin's chapter investigates two corpora representing the Early Modern English period, the manuscript-based Corpus of Scottish Correspondence containing data in which sentence structure and clause structure have not been modernized. Those data are far more idiosyncratic in their positioning of "Given" and "New," which makes us realize that the quite different pace and patterns of change in the various written registers resulted in different "grammars of prose" (Perret 1988), each requiring a detailed study at the levels of utterance, discourse, and text structure. This chapter, which discusses patterns in epistolary prose, is a reminder that there are also external forces at work: the growing literacy of the population, and the development of a literary culture. This means that the trends in Early Modern English observed by Pérez-Guerra, Seoane, and Los might also be an artifact of the developing "grammar of prose" discussed in the previous section, rather than an autonomous linguistic development.

Although Van linden and Davidse's chapter differs from that of van Kemenade and Westergaard in that they look at another construction in another period, they support the same overall findings. They demonstrate that speakers converge on information-structural triggers as a division of labor between variant constructions, in this case the finite and nonfinite complements to deontic adjectives like *important*, with the nonfinite complement, with its implicit subject, increasingly being reserved for cases where such

subjects can easily be recovered from the context (“accessible subjects”). This trend is reversed in later Modern English when there is competition from two other complement types, the complex transitive and the *for* + NP construction, and the nonfinite clause is increasingly associated with a particular style and register.

Although the convergence on special written styles for specific registers and purposes may indicate a widening gap between spoken and written language in the Early Modern era, with its higher rates of literacy, the growth of urban centers, and the advent of printing, Timofeeva’s chapter on the translation of Latin absolute participial constructions reveals that Old English translators, irrespective of their translation skills, are already competent writers in terms of providing textual cohesion and marking text items as of greater or lesser importance. In general, they manage to reproduce the source information structure correctly.

Although the titles of the three remaining chapters by Allen, Breban, and Vartiainen and the periods they investigate suggest quite different topics of research, they all concentrate on the internal structure of the NP, and the story they tell is a very coherent one.

Allen investigates the Poss Det Adj construction (as in *his the red gem*), which is fairly frequent in Old English. She argues that the determiner is part of the Adjective Phrase here; there is a historical explanation in that weak adjectives are nominalizations in origin. In Present-Day English, determiners are only possible as the specifier inside an NP. Allen speculates that, as the nominal character of the weak adjectives became less clear, speakers trying to assign a function to the Poss Det Adj structure to explain its existence alongside the Poss Adj construction may have converged on an information-structural interpretation. Her data show that Det, as a sign of identifiability, only appears before adjectives in the Poss Det Adj construction if the adjective is nonrestrictive.

Breban’s chapter also discusses the determiners, and their role in encoding identifiability, and outlines a scenario in which the grammaticalization of the demonstrative to definite article (OE *se* to *the*) and of the numeral to the indefinite article (OE *an* ‘one’ to *a(n)*) meant the loss of their earlier discourse meanings of salience, presence, specificity, and discourse-newness—meanings restored by the rise of a set of complex determiners including *a certain*, *the same*, and so on.

This observation is indirectly supported by Vartiainen’s chapter, whose case study of the grammaticalization of *coming*, *past*, *above*, *below*, and *following* as a text-structuring device inside an NP shows that the determiner-premodification system in the NP is reorganized in Early Modern English. *Following*, once a postnominal modifier with a temporal meaning, requires a textual function and a new position as premodifier; the positional innovation follows a general trend for premodifying rather than postmodifying adjectives (“prenominalization”), but the existence of two options for *coming*, *past*, *above*, *below*, and *following* when the general postnominal adjective position has been lost means that speakers may converge on a new interpretation for what motivates these positions. At first, the interpretation appears to be that prenominal position points to a text-structuring use and postnominal position to the old temporal use. However, once prenominalization increases as a general pattern, and temporal uses also appear prenominally, *following* and the other modifiers studied in prenominal position are reinterpreted as referring to material in the immediate textual vicinity, and postnominal position to material that is not in the immediate vicinity.

What these three chapters show is that the internal structure of the NP becomes more elaborate and starts to incorporate an extra determiner slot in Early Modern English. This ties in with the changes in word order and information structure, as Los argues in the second chapter. If discourse linking increasingly has to be achieved in Early Modern English by subjects rather than adverbials in first position, this explains the increasing complexity of the internal structure of the NP, and the development of new textual and linking functions for temporal adjectives (like *following*). The different textual effects of linking by means of a first position adverbial (*Also*) compared to linking by means of the subject (*An added incentive for joining Beth's department*) is demonstrated by examples (11a–b), from two different versions of a scholarly essay:

- (11) Beth welcomed more and more linguistic students who were interested in the new approach and disliked the hostile attitude of older linguists, especially Reichling.
- a. *Also*, students who were interested in Chomsky's work could not read Syntactic Structures without some mathematical and logical help, which was supplied by Beth's staff.
  - b. *An added incentive for joining Beth's department* was the fact that Chomsky's Syntactic Structures was not accessible without some knowledge of mathematics and logic, which was supplied by Beth's staff. (Elffers 2006: 91)

The element of “addition” in the adverbial *also* translates as an adjective like *added* (or *further*, or *other*, etc.) in the subject NP. If subjects are increasingly roped in to convey the link with the previous discourse, it is not surprising to find changes in the internal structure of the NP to compensate for the loss in the cohesive function of non-subjects.

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PART ONE

*Syntax and Information Structure:  
From Verb-Second/Object-Verb to  
Subject-Verb-Object*



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## CHAPTER 2

# The Loss of Verb-Second and the Switch from Bounded to Unbounded Systems

BETTELOU LOS

### ABSTRACT

This study argues that the loss of verb-second, the rule of finite verb placement in Old English, entails much more than a gradual falling off of the frequency of verb movement, affecting the syntax and information structure of English in a pervasive and profound way. Finite verb movement created a special, multifunctional first position which could host contrastively focused material as well as unmarked links to the previous discourse. Recent psycholinguistic research has linked verb-second to a deeper typological difference between languages in the way that speakers encode events: as bounded or unbounded in place or time. When verb-second was lost in English, the language underwent a typological switch which necessitated creating a new set of coding options. This means that the syntactic innovations, like unusual passives and stressed-focus clefts, in Early Modern English not only emerged as “therapy” because information structure had been compromised by the loss of a multifunctional first position, but also because of a typological switch from bounded to unbounded.

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Dutch and German exhibit an asymmetry in word order patterns in main and subclauses: subclauses are verb-final, whereas main clauses have the finite verb in second place. With the advent of transformational generative theory, this phenomenon obviously called for an explanation in terms of a transformation—but which order should be taken as underlying, and which as derived: that of the main clause or that of the subclause? Koster (1975) argued persuasively that the underlying order should be assumed to be the Subject-Object-Verb order of the subclause. Main clause orders can then be derived by two movement rules: one that puts the finite verb into second position, and a second

rule that topicalizes a constituent from the clause into first position. This constituent may be moved from any position in the clause, and may have any syntactic function. These two movement rules have been labeled collectively as “verb-second.”

Koster’s assumption of underlying SOV for Modern Dutch fits the intuitive notion that Germanic was SOV at an earlier stage but developed verb-second in main clauses initially as a response to pressures at the level of information structure; the motivation behind verb-second may have been at first stylistic, an optional rule to draw attention to the special information-structural status of the first constituent. It is a common finding that subclauses tend to preserve older orders, whereas main clauses tend to innovate: main clauses have to satisfy various communicative requirements, the positioning of focus and discourse-old or discourse-new material, and they therefore tend to develop special constructions not found in the subclause (see Bybee 2001). The finite verb may possibly have functioned as a focus marker first, as still in Hungarian (Comrie 1989: 63), and may later have become entrenched as a syntactic device.

The verb-second rule operates slightly differently in Old English (OE) than in Modern Dutch or Modern German, as was demonstrated by van Kemenade (1987) using Koster’s diagnostic tests, and this difference could perhaps provide some pointers to the original motivation of this movement rule. When the first constituent is a *wh*-word, the negator *ne*, or a member of a restricted group of adverbs, most prominently *þa* ‘then,’ the finite verb (in italics in (1a–b)) will immediately follow in second position in OE, as it does in Modern Dutch or German, with the subject, whether nominal (as *seo eadiga Margareta* in (1a)) or pronominal (as *he* in (1b)), in the third position:

- (1) (a) *ða geherde seo eadiga Margareta and hi hit on bocum fand,*  
 then heard the blessed Margaret and she it in books found  
*þæt þa cinges and þa ealdormenn and þa yfela gerefan ofslogen æfre and*  
 that the kings and the aldermen and the evil reeves killed ever and  
*bebyrodon ealle þa godes theowas, þe þær on lande wæron* <LS 14 (MargaretAss) 32><sup>1</sup>  
 buried all the god’s servants who there in land were  
 ‘Then the blessed Margaret heard said, and found it written in books, that the kings  
 and aldermen and the evil reeves were constantly killing and burying all the servants  
 of God who were there in that country’
- (b) *ða he on his wege rad, þa beseah he on þæt eadigan mæden,*  
 then he on his way rode then looked he on that blessed maiden  
*þær þe hi sæt wlitig and fæger onmang hire geferan.*  
 there where she sat beautiful and fair among her companions  
*ða cwæð he to his cnihtum: Ridað hraþe to þære fæmnan and axiað hire,*  
 then said he to his servants ride quickly to that girl and ask her  
*gif hi seo frig.* <LS 14 (MargaretAss) 53–4>  
 if she is free  
 ‘When he was riding on his way, he beheld that blessed maiden where she was sitting  
 among her companions, beautiful and fair; then he said to his servants:  
 “Ride quickly to that girl and ask her if she is free.”’

However, there is an important difference in the working of the verb-second rule that obscures the resemblance of OE to the other West-Germanic languages: if the first

constituent is a topicalized nominal or prepositional object, or adjunct, rather than a *wh*-word, the negator *ne*, or an adverb like *þa* ‘then,’ and the subject is a pronoun, things are different. In (2), with the prepositional object *On þe* ‘in you’ in first position, the pronoun subject precedes the finite verb, which now looks to be in third place (finite verb in italics):

- (2) And seo eadiga Margareta hire handan upp ahof and hi to gode gebæd  
 and the blessed Margaret her hands up lifted and her to God prayed  
 and þus cwæð: on þe ic *gelefa* ... < LS 14 (MargaretAss) 119>  
 and thus spoke on thee I believe  
 ‘And the blessed Margaret lifted up her hands and prayed to God and spoke thus: “In you I believe ...”’

The different positions for pronominal subjects in (1b) and (2) could perhaps be regarded as the outcome of what were originally two different verb placement rules, one motivated by a need to mark off foci, which would include verb movement after first-position elements like question words, negation, and contrastively focused phrases, and another verb placement rule to mark off topics and other backgrounded information. This is in line with Lambrecht’s insight (Lambrecht 1994: 31–2) that the first position of a main clause is a “cognitively privileged position” for which marked topics and marked foci naturally compete. The former type of verb placement, demarcating a focus area, can be argued to have survived in Present-Day English (PDE) as subject-auxiliary inversion (Los & Komen forthcoming). The latter type, verb movement after first-position subjects, objects, and adverbials, as in (2), may have served a different purpose: marking off given—the aboutness topic and other background elements—from new (as argued in Hinterhölzl & Petrova 2010: 319<sup>2</sup>). It is this second type that is the main focus in this chapter: the preverbal “background” domain links to the immediately preceding discourse by means of a (moved) subject, an object, or an adverbial. This explains the deviant behavior of pronominal subjects: if this moved constituent is not the subject, but an adverbial or object, there will be two given constituents: the object or adverbial and the pronominal subject.<sup>3</sup> The given constituent in first position could itself also be (contrastively) focused, in Topic Shift or Contrastive Left Dislocation, as we will see in section 2.4.2, and this may have led to the conflation of the two types of verb movement and their separate motivations that we find in Modern Dutch and German. The odd one out in this scenario is the adverb *þa* ‘then,’ which, with very few other similar adverbs (like *þonne* ‘then’), is aligned with the focus-demarcating higher position of the finite verb, as we saw in (1a), rather than the expected given-new demarcating lower position; see also Trips & Fuß (2009).

Verb-second declines in Middle English (ME) for reasons that have been claimed to involve both external (language or dialect contact) and internal (loss of morphology, loss of clitic status of pronouns) factors; for an overview, see Los (2009). Verb-second does not show a measured decline: no two studies report the same rates (see Fischer et al. 2000: 132ff for an overview). The problem is that the various surface orders found in OE main clauses are analytically ambiguous, with many orders (as in (2) for instance) multi-interpretable (see Haeberli 2002, Warner 2007, Los 2009). The decline of verb-second is charted and discussed by van Kemenade and Westergaard (this volume).