

The Decline of Verb-Second in the History of English: Combining Historical and Theoretical Explanations for Change

Authors : Sophie Whittle

Abstract : Prior to present day, English syntax historically exhibited an inconsistent verb-second (V2) rule, which saw the verb move to the second position in the sentence following the fronting of a type of phrase. There was a high amount of variation throughout the history of English with regard to the ordering of subject and verb, and many explanations attempting to account for this variation have been documented in previous literature. However, these attempts have been contradictory, with many accounts positing the effect of previous syntactic changes as the main motivations behind the decline of V2. For instance, morphosyntactic changes, such as the loss of clitics and the loss of empty expletives, have been loosely connected to changes in frequency for the loss of V2. The questions surrounding the development of non-V2 in English have, therefore, yet to be answered. The current paper aims to bring together a number of explanations from different linguistic fields to determine the factors driving the changes in English V2. Using historical corpus-based methods, the study analyses both quantitatively and qualitatively the changes in frequency for the history of V2 in the Old, Middle, and Modern English periods to account for the variation in a range of sentential environments. These methods delve into the study of information structure, prosody and language contact to explain variation within different contexts. The analysis concludes that these factors, in addition to changes within the syntax, are responsible for the position of verb movement. The loss of V2 serves as an exemplar study within the field of historical linguistics, which combines a number of factors in explaining language change in general.

Keywords : corpora, English, language change, mixed-methods, syntax, verb-second

Conference Title : ICHL 2021 : International Conference on Historical Linguistics

Conference Location : Paris, France

Conference Dates : July 19-20, 2021