

Verb movement and negation in Scandinavian: a contemporary study of variability in change

A classic case study for the relation between morphology and syntax is the variation in the position of the verb with respect to negation and to sentence-medial adverbs in the Scandinavian languages; as is well-known, in Icelandic—a language with rich agreement morphology—the finite verb precedes all these elements, while in all the standard Mainland Scandinavian languages—lacking all agreement on finite verbs—the order is reversed. Work on the latter group of languages suggests that in both Swedish and Danish (as in English) the loss of agreement preceded the loss of verb movement within the clause (“V-to-I”).

The details of this diachronic development raise a number of questions concerning the origin and course of syntactic change that are related on the one hand to theories of the interface between morphology and syntax, and on the other to theories of language acquisition and change in situations of sparse data. In this paper we aim to address some of these questions with new data from Faroese, a Scandinavian language that has been argued to be currently undergoing the change known from the historical record of Swedish and Danish.

First, we will present and discuss judgment data for contemporary Faroese, gathered using the methodology of Magnitude Estimation (Bard et al 1996) and currently under analysis, which compare the acceptability of structures in which the verb precedes and follows not only negation, but also “high” and “low” adverbs (Cinque 1999). Until now it seems generally assumed that the variability in these orders in Faroese is variation between a grammar like Icelandic, in which the verb must obligatorily precede all these elements, and a grammar like modern standard Danish, Norwegian, or Swedish, in which the verb must obligatorily follow all (how this variation can exist not just within a community but within an individual is a key question for the nature of syntactic change and the theory of grammar more generally). However, recent work on dialects of Norwegian (Bentzen 2005) reveals that some also exhibit variable movement past sentence-medial adverbs (despite the absence of agreement morphology), but not past negation. Our results will be the first to directly address the question of whether there is any evidence for such a system in Faroese—and hence for grammars at an “intermediate” stage of a change that may be distinct from both the older grammar and the only known direct influence (Danish).

Second, we will present judgment data for Danish, Icelandic and Faroese, obtained using the same methodology, which will allow us to directly compare the grammaticality of embedded Verb Second (V2) in these three languages. This phenomenon is intimately linked to the question of how verb movement is acquired (e.g. deGraff 1999), and whether it derives immediately from the morphology, a relation pointed out in Vikner 1995 but often overlooked. The success of Icelandic children in acquiring V-to-I despite the masking effect of Verb Second (V2) in all main clauses is a strong *prima facie* argument for a tight relation between agreement morphology and V-to-I (contra e.g. Alexiadou & Fanselow 2002). Even more dramatically, it has been argued that V2 is possible in a very wide range of embedded clauses (i.e. Icelandic exhibits “generalized embedded V2”); if this is correct, Icelandic children are either able to set the relevant parameter correctly on the basis of extremely sparse and generally ambiguous data, or they must be able to rely on the morphology. This in turn suggests that a reduction in agreement morphology would have a catastrophic effect on V-to-I. However, there has always been some controversy over the status of “generalized embedded V2”, a recent contribution by Bentzen et al (2007) arguing that V2 is no more available in Icelandic than in the other Scandinavian languages. Our ongoing work is the first attempt of which we are aware to systematically and quantifiably compare these languages to provide a solid empirical base for conclusions about the type and quantity of evidence necessary for the acquisition—and transmission—of a grammar with V-to-I.

References

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