

Historical Survey of VP-fronting in English

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Abstract: This paper observes that VP fronting in the early stage of English shares some properties with a German counterpart syntactically and semantically. In particular, as with German, my careful examination of historical corpora shows that the information structure imposed on the fronted VP is required to be discourse-new (i.e., focus) in the Middle English period and has been changed into discourse-old, what we observe in Present-day English. Moreover, I imply that this change is somehow associated with the loss of Verb Second in the fourteenth century, because the timing of the change accords with that of the loss. This implication leads us to further investigate other information structure-sensitive constructions from a historical perspective.

Keywords: VP-fronting, Information Structure, language change, Germanic Languages, Middle English

1. Introduction

The paper is concerned with VP-fronting (VPF) in English from the historical perspective compared with the German counterpart. Observe the following:

- (1) a. It was necessary to pass, and pass I did.
(English, Huddleston & Pullum (2002:1377), underline mine)
- b. Das Buch gelesen hat Hans gestern. (German)
the book read has Hans yesterday
“*lit.* Peter read the book yesterday.”

Informally speaking, VPF is defined as the construction where the verb is located to the left side over a subject. In this respect, the contrast in (1) apparently exhibits that VPF in English and German are similar. The further detailed observations, however, denies it. For example, VPF in German allows fronting of a verb with the object stranded:

- (2) a.* Read, John did the book yesterday.
- b. Gelesen hat Hans das Buch gestern.
read has Hans the book yesterday
“*lit.* Hans read the book yesterday.”

Various analyses have been proposed for the contrast; among them, the best known is remnant movement of VP (e.g., Müller, 1998). This analysis suggests that a string such as (2a) is obtained through the object moving to somewhere first and the subsequent movement of the VP as a whole. Further, German allows movement of VP with a(n agentive) subject, although somehow restricted, but English never does:

- (3) a.* Cats chased mice, have already often here.
- b. Katzen Mäuse gejagt haben hier schon oft
cats mice chased have here already schon
“It has often happened here that cats chased mice.”
(Lee-Schoenfeld & Lunden (2014:14))

According to Lee-Schoenfeld and Lunden, the utterance of (3b) is highly restricted: the fronted *vP* (i.e., VP with a subject) must be athetic judgment (Kuroda, 1972).

Next, consider the difference in the sense of information structure. As shown in (3), the fronting VP with a(n agentive) subject is required to be thetic judgment as the assertion regarding the frequency of the occurrence of a generic situation. However, because VPF in English does not allow for the fronting of *vP*, I would like to consider pure predicate (i.e., VP) fronting. Ward (1990) produced a seminal work on the pragmatic effect on VPF in English. According to him, the effect is proposition affirmation (see also Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). Furthermore, the effect is divided into three functions:

- (4)
- a. *Independent Proposition Affirmation*
it “affirms a proposition that is neither semantically entailed by nor presupposed in the prior discourse.”
we went to Canada to learn, and learn we did.
 - b. *Concessive Affirmation*
it “affirms a proposition that stands in *rhetorical opposition* to another proposition conceded in the prior discourse.”
It was ironic, he continued, that he eventually learned more from his mother’s papers and tapes than he had directly from her. But learn her story he did...
 - c. *Scalar Affirmation*
it “affirms a proposition whose predicate is construable as a scale upon which the subject represents a high value.”
Smith errs — and err he does!

(Ward (1990:743-744), with modifications)

Although subtly different in function, I can safely assert that VPF in English requires the fronted VP to be discourse-given either explicitly or implicitly. By contrast, in German, it is not necessary that the fronted VP in VPF must be discourse-given; rather this is required to be (contrastive) focus (i.e., new information), as the following *nicht* clause exemplifies:

- (5)
- | | | | | | | |
|-----------|-----------|-----|----------------------|-----------|------|-----------|
| Ein Tiger | entwichen | ist | dem Wanderzirkus, | nicht ein | Löwe | gestorben |
| a tiger | escaped | is | the traveling-circus | not a | lion | died |
- “What happened to the traveling circus was that a tiger escaped, not that a lion died.”
(Lee-Schoenfeld & Lunden (2014:12), with slight modifications)

To shortly summarize, it is clearly observed that VPFs in English and German are different from the syntactic and semantic perspectives. Thus, the curious and natural question is, how were the early stages of English? This paper answers the question and might further contribute to the structure of Germanic languages.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 mentions the research methodology and data collection methods. Section 3 provides and analyzes the data. Section 4 implies the cause of the information structural change. Finally, Section 5 draws a conclusion and offers the direction of future research.

2. Research Method

2.1 Corpora

To obtain the relevant data, I used the electronic historical corpus, Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English 2nd Edition (PPCME2), Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English (PPCEME), and Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Modern British English (PPCMBE). These corpora cover Middle English to Modern English periods (i.e., 1150–1839). I refrained from obtaining data from the Old English period (450–1150) because it is difficult to judge, in OE, whether a VP is fronted in a token. Old English is not so rigid in word order as the periods since Middle English or even German. Thus, further research for Old English needs to be conducted.

2.2 Query

Because VPFs are mainly observable in main clauses (i.e., root phenomena, Emonds, 1976) and in early Middle English and German, Verb Second (V2) is restricted to main clauses; the tokens I obtained involve such clauses. Hence, the queries I formulated are as follows:

- (6) node: IP-MAT*
 query: (IP-MAT* idoms AUX*)
 AND (VB* has Sister AUX*)
 AND (VB* Precedes AUX*)

Note that *AUX** in (6) is an abbreviation: I used *MD**, *DO**, *HV**, and *BE** and formulated each query. This query guarantees that the possibly attestable data in question are *(XP) VB* (YP) AUX* (ZP)*. This entails that the query I formulated does not prevent logically obtaining the string *Subject Object Verb AUX*, as with German (3b). Section 3 provides the data attested and analyzes it.

3. Data and Analysis

3.1 Data

Before providing the data attested, I review the comparison of VPF in English with that in German. Table 1 summarizes the observations in Section 1:

Table 1: Characteristics of VPF in English and German

	<i>V-Fronting</i>	<i>vP-Fronting</i>	<i>Information Structure on Fronted VP</i>
English	×	×	given information
German	○	○	new information

Next, I observe the attested data. Table 2 shows the frequency of VPF in each subperiod:

Table 2: Attested Data of VPF

	M1	M2	M3	M4	E1	E2	E3	ModE1	ModE2
Period	1150- 1250	1250- 1350	1350- 1420	1420- 1500	1500- 1569	1570- 1639	1640- 1710	1700- 1769	1770- 1839
N	15	4	1	0	2	1	1	3	2

(M = Middle English, E = early Modern English, ModE = late Modern English)

In this section, we are limited to the topic of the absence or presence of V-fronting and vP-fronting (i.e., VP with an agentive subject). In short, regarding vP-fronting, I have not attested such data; additionally, I have obtained V-fronting, a string in which a verb is fronted and an argument DP stranded:

- (7) Ach þach ic hefde isworen [luuien t_i] ich mot þe.
 Ah but I had sworn love I must you
 “I could not help loving you”

(CMANCRIW-1, II. 76. 890)

Although the productivity of V-fronting such as (7) in these periods in utterances is not and cannot be clear, I conclude that, at least in Middle English, the VPF has something in common with that of German. In Section 3.2, I consider the situation in the semantic sense, that is, information structure imposed on the fronted VP.

3.2 Analysis

Notably, the notions aforementioned, such as *given* and *new*, are somehow rough; thus, they should be discreet and distinguished further. For this purpose, I refer to independent research for a historical survey on object fronting in Old English and Middle English within the information structural perspective by Dreschler (2014). Although I do not review his result in this study, he analyzes fronted objects dividing the two notions into four. *Given* is divided into *old* and *accessible*, and *new* anchored and *new*, as follows:

- (8) a. *Old*
mentioned in the discourse
b. *Accessible*
shared knowledge, elaborating inferables, generic
c. *Anchored*
one element linked (anchored) to the discourse, bridging inferables
d. *New*
newly introduced

(Dreschler (2014:121))

With these notions in mind, I analyze the attested data in detail. In particular, I investigate the context in which a VPF occurs and, based on this, I categorize each token into the four information structural notions. The result is presented in Table 3:

Table 3: Attested Data of VPF

Period	M1 1150- 1250	M2 1250- 1350	M3 1350- 1420	M4 1420- 1500	E1 1500- 1569	E2 1570- 1639	E3 1640- 1710	ModE1 1700- 1769	ModE2 1770- 1839
<i>Old</i>					1				2
<i>Accessible</i>					1	1	1	2	
<i>Anchored</i>	6	3	1					1	
<i>New</i>	6								
undetermined	3	1							
Total	15	4	1	0	2	1	1	3	2

The following is the data with their contexts.

- (9) M1
a. *Anchored*
(*Context*: No seduction is so perfidious as that which is in a plaintive strain; as if one spoke thus: “I would rather suffer death, than indulge an impure thought with regard to you;”)
Ach þach ic hefde isworen **luuien ich mot þe.**
Ah but I had sworn love I must you
“I could not help loving you”
(CMANCRIW-1, II. 76. 890)
- b. *New*
(*Context*: and þe axletree stood stretched on its two sides into stoness posts, so that, as it turned, it overreached nowhere beneath to the earth)
grisen him mahte þet sehe hu hit gront into hwet-se hit of-rahte
shudder himself might that sees how it ground into whatever it of-reached
“One might be filled with horror, who saw it how it ground into whatever it reached.”
(CMJULIA, 117. 366)

- (10) E2
 a. *Accessible*
 (*Context*: When amidst them both thou satisfiedst the expectation of cousuls with all the rout, as with a liberal triumph? Thou flatteredest Fortune, as I suppose, while she stroked thee and cherished as her darling. Thou tookest away the reward that to private man she never lent afore. Will you now spurn at her? Hath she with a heavy eye now strained thee? If thou do weigh the number and trade of pleasant and woeful, thou canst not yet deny thyself happy. If therefore thou thinkest not thyself fortunate for seeming joys bypast, no cause why thou thyself a wretch suppose:)
 for **passe they doo** that wofull now be thought
 for pass they do that woeful now be thought
 “for pass they do, that woeful now be thought.”
 (BOETHEL-E2-P1,26.309)
- (11) E3
 a. *Accessible*
 (*Context*: The services at several Tables, the good order & decency, in a word the intire O economie perfectly becoming, a wise & noble person, & one whom for her distinguishing esteeme of me from a long & worthy friendship; I must ever honor & Celebrate:)
 and wish I do from my Soule’
 (EVELYN-E3-P2,887.240)
- (12) ModE1
 a. *Accessible*
 (*Context*: To say the truth, there are several ceremonies instituted among the polished part of mankind, which, though they may, to coarser judgments, appear as matters of mere form, are found to have much of substance in them, by the more discerning; and luckily would it have been, had the custom above mentioned been observed by our gentleman in the present instance.)
Knock, indeed, he did at the door, but not with one of those gentle raps which is usual on such Occasions.
- (13) ModE2
 a. *Old*
 (*Context*: “The fit was a sudden faintness, such as I have had I know not how often; no harm came of it, and all is well. I cannot go [to Oxford] till Saturday,...)
 and then **go I will** if I can. My clothes, Mr. Thrale says, must be made like other people’s, and they are gone to the tailor’s”
 (JOHNSON-1775, 2, 33. 655)
- b. *Old*
 (*Context*: But why not now?, victorious Lambesc, charge through that Tuileries Garden itself, where the fugitives are vanishing? Not show the Sunday promenaders too, how steel glitters, besprent with blood; that it be told of, and men’s ears tingle?)
-Tingle, alas, they did; but the wrong way.
 (CARLYLE-183, 17, 151. 383)

Notably, the information structure imposed on the fronted VP has dynamically changed from *old* to *new* (Table 3). Furthermore, I consider that Middle English exhibits a common property observed in many Germanic languages: Verb Second (V2) phenomena, under which a finite verb is located in the second position preceded by any constituent in the first in main clauses (e.g., den Besten, 1982). Thus, it is not implausible to suggest that—at least early—Middle English somehow shares the property of fronted VP with German in this respect, although *vP*-fronting (i.e., the fronted VP with an agentive subject) has not been attested in some early stages of English.

4. Implications

As discussed, we observed that VPF in Middle English is associated with that in German syntactically and semantically, and that in the later stage (i.e., Modern English), it has become close to what we observe in Present-day English. Additionally, the most essential difference distinguishing Middle English and German from Present-day English is the presence/absence of V2. According to Fishcer *et al.* (2000), the loss of V2 in English is established in the Middle English period; more precisely, the literature has reported that V2 in Middle English was lost in the fourteenth century. By including this general information, we illustrate the process involved as follows:

(14)

	<i>ME</i>	>	<i>EModE</i>	>	<i>LModE</i>	>	<i>PE</i>	(German)	
IS on Fronted VP	<i>New</i>		<i>Old</i>		<i>Old</i>		<i>Old</i>		<i>New</i>
V-Fronting	attested		n/a		n/a		n/a		attested
V2	fully available		residual		residual		residual		fully available

(IS = Information Structure, ME = Middle English, E(L)ModE = Early (Late) Modern English, PE = Present-day English)

Figure 1: The Process of Information-Structural Change on the Fronted VP

The attested data in this research are highly limited in number; thus, caution must be exercised when drawing a conclusion that the change in the means of expressing information structure since Middle English was caused by a more essential change such as the loss of V2 in Middle English. Nevertheless, this result convincingly suggests that the loss of V2, which has been claimed to be a consequence of a result of the loss of V movement to C through T for morphological declination (e.g., Nawata, 2008), is, in some sense, associated with the change of the left periphery (cf. Rizzi, 1997) of the early stage of English. To conduct an investigation in this context, the scrutiny of other constructions associated with left periphery from a historical perspective is required.

5. Conclusions

This paper has shown that VPF in the early stage of English shares some properties with the German counterpart syntactically and semantically. In particular, as with German, the information structure imposed on the fronted VP is required to be discourse-new (i.e., focus) in the Middle English period and has been changed into discourse-old, what is observed in present-day English. Although merely suggestive, I have hinted at the possibility that such a change is associated with the loss of V2, based on the timing of the loss accords with that of the change from new to old around the end of the Middle English period. For further study, an assertion should be that other constructions associated with left periphery are required to be scrutinized from a historical perspective.

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Corpora

Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English, 2nd Edition
Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English
Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Modern British English