

The Evolution of Information Structure and Verb Second in the History of French



Dissertation Defense: Devan Steiner

The goal of this dissertation is to address the question of the V2 status of Old French as well as its decline by examining the interaction of syntax and Information Structure (IS) in the Left Periphery from the 13th century through the 16th century. Old French (OFr) has long been considered to be a Verb Second language, due to the overwhelming tendency for the finite verb to occur as the second constituent in matrix clauses, the hallmark of Verb Second (V2). Recently, the V2 analysis OFr has been called into question, due to the relatively high rate of clauses with more than one preverbal constituent (V>2). During this same period, our understanding of what V2 is has evolved in such a way as to place less emphasis on the number of preverbal constituents, and more on the theoretical underpinnings of the clause structure.

The results, obtained using a methodology for the annotation of IS in a corpus created for this project, support the V2 analysis of 13th century French, both in terms of its syntax and its IS. From a descriptively syntactic stance much of decline of V2 occurs between the 13th and 14th centuries (e.g. the rise in V>2 clauses, the decline in postverbal subjects). However, in examining the IS changes, we find that key aspects of the V2 grammar (e.g. ban on movement past SpecFinP) are robust into the 15th century.

Ultimately, we find that examining Old French syntax through the lens of IS provides new insight into the interaction between IS and syntax in language change, especially with respect to both the manner and the timeline of the decline of V2 in the history of French.

Wednesday, August 6, 2014
10:00 am
Indiana Memorial Union
Hoosier Room

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