When information structure exploits syntax: The relation between the loss of VO and scrambling in Dutch

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This paper addresses the relationship between two types of word order variation relating to the position of the object observed in historical Dutch: local scrambling (i.e. object movement over an adverbial) and OV/VO variation. Information structural considerations influence both types of variation, and we demonstrate by means of a comprehensive corpus study of Dutch written between 1200 and 1900 that they have a comparable pattern: given objects tend to appear earlier in the sentence than new objects. But as VO becomes less productive, the middle field appears to establish itself as the locus of information structure distinctions. We infer from this that the two types of word order variation may be diachronically related.

Our findings support an analysis of scrambling as object movement from a uniformly head-initial base via the specifier of VP to the specifier of vP, motivated by the need to check structural features, along the lines of Broekhuis (2008). We argue that the object leaves copies in each intermediate position, and which copy is spelled out depends on (discourse-pragmatic) interface conditions. Historical Dutch allows Spell Out of the object in postverbal base position, but this possibility was arguably lost due to internal pressure to reduce the optionality in Spell Out positions. The boundary marker between the topological domains in which given and new information is expressed consequently shifts from the verb to the adverbial. Our analysis allows for a natural transition from Dutch as a flexible OV/VO language to a fixed OV language with variation in object placement in the middle field.

References

Broekhuis, Hans. 2008. *Derivations and evaluations: Object shift in the Germanic languages.* Berlin: de Gruyter Mouton**.**