

Contact-induced word order change in Old Swedish and Middle Low German

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Old Swedish (OSw) exhibits a higher degree of word order variation than its modern counterpart, particularly with respect to the position of the object relative to the main verb (OV/VO) and the position of the finite auxiliary (VAux/AuxV).

Within the generative tradition, Delsing (1999), Petzell (2011), and Sangfelt (2019) identify a diachronic development from OV to VO order. The finite verb generally occupies the second position in the embedded clause, a pattern analysed by Platzack (1988), Falk (1993), and Håkansson (2011) in terms of verb movement, often in relation to sentential negation and subject type.

Although these studies provide a detailed account of the gradual shift towards the fixed modern Swedish subordinate clause order (AuxVO), they struggle in explaining a brief resurgence of OV and VAux orders in the Late OSw period. Language-internal explanations have been proposed, most notably Stylistic Fronting (SF) and the Rich Agreement Hypothesis (RAH), but neither are without criticism, see Håkansson (2011) on SF and Håkansson (2013) on the RAH.

An alternative explanation lies in language-external factors, in particular in contact-induced change. The contact situation between OSw and Middle Low German (MLG) is well documented (see Rambø 2010), and is known to have resulted in extensive lexical transfer as shown by Wessén (1954). The possibility of syntactic transfer of OV and VAux from MLG is often mentioned in the literature, but rarely developed in detail due to a focus on internal developments (with Petzell 2014 as a notable exception).

In this paper, I argue that the OV and VAux orders attested in Late OSw data from the city of Kalmar can be explained as the result of structural transfer of a V-final (OV) and T-final (VAux) base order from MLG. Material from Kalmar is a particularly suitable testing ground, as Kalmar has been consistently excluded from previous studies despite, or rather, because of its status as a former member of the Hanseatic League and thus as an intense contact area.

First, applying the syntactic diagnostics of Bies (1996), I show that OSw displays grammar competition between three base orders: T-medial/V-initial, T-medial/V-final, and T-final/V-final, whereas MLG consistently shows a single T-final/V-final grammar. Second, taking language-internal developments into account, I argue that the T-final grammar in OSw reflects syntactic imposition by (German) adult L2 speakers of OSw, in line with the acquisitional approach to contact-induced change proposed by Lucas (2015). Third, OSw and MLG are shown to converge in linear word order distributions, with the increase of OV and VAux orders confirmed in the material from Kalmar.

Using OSw and MLG as a case study in comparative syntax and language contact, this paper argues that a parametric approach to head-directionality, modelled as grammar competition by Kroch (2001), remains a useful framework for analysing word order variation and change, provided that base order and (surface) linear order are not conflated. More broadly, this paper suggests that contact-induced change can influence abstract grammatical options in addition to mere surface distributions. Thus, integrating sociohistorical, syntactic, and acquisitional evidence is crucial for identifying such effects in diachronic data.

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