

*How is “given information” expressed in the history of English? An investigation into subjects and “local anchors”*

Investigations into word order change in the history of English has over the years uncovered a number of broad patterns, but there remains a sizeable area of unexplained syntactic variation. Much of the syntactic variation recorded is possibly not only a matter of competing grammars, but might be motivated by information-structure considerations. Few people would deny that syntax and information interact, but even synchronic investigations run into difficulties not only because of the proliferation of information-structure terms and definitions (“Given” and “New,” topic and comment, topic and focus, background and focus, theme and rheme, Common Ground, presupposed information and pragmatically unrecoverable information) but also because getting reasonable interrater agreement rates when annotating a corpus of natural texts with such labels has proved problematic. For a diachronic investigation, these problems are multiplied because we cannot rely on form (demonstratives in Old English fulfil functions that are later divided up between demonstratives and definite articles) or on word order (English lost OV orders and a V2-like fronting of the finite verb). For an NWO-project (the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research) about the consequences of the loss of V2 in English, we decided to bypass topic and focus labels by annotating referential information only, using the “Pentaset”, a version of the taxonomy of “given” information of Prince (1981). One of the hypotheses of the project was that information-structural statuses increasingly map onto specific functions after the loss of V2, with subjects by default encoding given information, and objects and complements new information (with special word orders and constructions providing escape hatches for subjects that are new, and objects that are given). This plenary will discuss an investigation into the changing role of subjects and clause-initial adjuncts in the history of English, on the basis of corpora enriched with referential information, as well as a comparison of parallel corpora of present-day V2 languages and present-day English.

*References*

Prince, Ellen. 1981. *Toward a taxonomy of given-new information*. In Peter Cole (ed.), *Radical Pragmatics*. New York: Academic Press, 223–254.