V2-complements in the history of German

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In modern German, asyndetic (complementizerless) clauses with the verb in second position (aV2) are a well-known, though restricted alternative to canonical complement clauses introduced by the complementizer dass 'that' (see Reis 1997, Meinunger 2007, Freywald 2013). While the conditions triggering this alternation are a well-established subject of investigation in present-day German, the diachronic dimensions of this phenomenon lack comparable attention in formal syntactic research. A notable exception is Axel-Tober (2012: Chapt. 3.4) who investigates the properties of complement clauses with medial verb placement in Old and Middle High German, rejecting their status of potential equivalents of aV2-clauses on the basis of the following argumentation. Frist, Axel-Tober (2012) observes that in the corpus she uses, no safe evidence supporting a V-in-C-analysis is available; by contrast, the attested orders can be properly derived via extrapolation within asyndetic verb-final clauses, a pattern which is widely attested in data of the period (1). Second, in some sporadic cases in which there is diagnostic evidence for verb movement to the left, the governing category is of a type that blocks rather than allows V2 in its complements in modern German, as e.g. the nouns lougen 'denial' and zuibel 'doubt' or the verbs zuivelôn 'to doubt', wellen 'to want' or geheizzan 'to command' (3). In general, Axel-Tober (2012) concludes that aV2-complements are missing in the earliest attestation and only enter the grammar of German later, during the Early New High German period.

Note, however, that the selection of V2-complements is subject of parametric variation across Germanic. This is not only true for V2 in that-complement clauses, whose licensing conditions vary across varieties of Icelandic (Gärtner 2003) as well as between Mainland Scandinavian, Frisian and German (de Haan 2001, Freywald 2008), but also for aV2-complements, which e.g. in Afrikaans can be licensed by exactly those verbs which block aV2 in modern German (Biberauer 2016). This invites the hypothesis that in case the evidence for verb movement is safe in the respective complement clauses in historical German, the differences in the type of the licensing categories may result from changes regarding the licensing conditions of aV2 over time. This hypothesis is borne out by the data. Searching the recently launched Referenzkorpus Altdeutsch, it was possible to determine the following two datasets involving diagnostic evidence for V-in-C in asyndetic complement clauses in OHG.

The first dataset involves the presence of pronominal arguments or adverbials like giwisso 'certainly' or rehto 'indeed' in postverbal position. As pronouns and adverbials of the mentioned kind do not undergo extraposition to the right themselves, orders in which the finite verb surfaces above such elements is diagnostic for verb movement to the left. As the examples suggest, this order is attested in the complements of verbs of saying, which are good aV2-licensors in modern German as well (4) but also in complements of directive verbs (5) which reject aV2 with a main verb in C in modern German (Truckenbrodt 2006).

The second dataset involves empty referential subjects (pro). This diagnostics is established by Axel (2007), who observes that pro in OHG is licensed via c-command by an element agreeing with the referential subject of pro in person and number. The c-command relation necessary for licensing pro can be provided either by way of complementizer inflection, as in modern dialects of German (Weiβ 2005), or by movement of V to C (Axel and Weiβ 2011). Applied to patterns as in (6) and (7), this diagnostics suggests that the verb must have moved to C to provide the agreement relation necessary for licensing pro. Note that this is also possible if the matrix predicate is one of the well-known 'blockers of aV2' in modern German, as e.g. to say in its use as a directive verb (6).

This evidence suggests that aV2-complements are possible in German from the very beginning of the attestation, but that the present-day distribution of this syntactic pattern is established after the MHG period, as a result of diachronic change in the licensing conditions of these clauses, thus providing another instance of parametric variation in the domain of embedded V2 across Germanic.
Data

(1) quad, thánana in quami wízzi \ joh mánagfalto núzzi
saw thereof them came-SubjII wisdom and much use

‘[the Serpent] said they would gain much wisdom and use thereby’ (O II 6, 15)

(2) ist tânne zuîuel. siu nesín uuíllig tes richtennes
is then doubt they Neg-are-SubjII willing the-Gen judging-Gen

‘there is doubt that they are unwilling to judge’

(Notker Boethius III 174, 22; Axel-Tober 2012: 156 = (71b))

(3) Man gebot dem herzogen Adelgère, er chome
ordered the duke-Dat he come-SubjI

‘They ordered that Duke Aderger came quickly to Lateran’

(Kaiserchronic 6820; cited in Paul 252007: 401; Axel-Tober 2012: 170 = (100))

(4) Ih zéllu iu, quad er ubarlút, alle wárut ir mir drút
I tell you said er openly all were you me-Dat dear

‘I tell you, he openly said, you were all dear to me’ (O IV 12, 5)

(5) bat man gábi imo then mán
asked Indef gave-SubjII him the-Acc man

‘[Joseph of Arimathea] asked that they gave him the man [the dead body of Jesus]’

(0 IV 35,6)

(6) siu quat, sus libiti pro, commen nehebiti pro
she said so lives-SubjII husband-Acc Neg-had-SubjII

‘she said, she lived alone, she had no husband’

(Klahd.Dkm., Chr.Samar., 24)

(7) Êr quad thes ni théhti pro
he said this-Gen Negt thought-SubjII

‘he [the angel] said, he [Joseph] should not consider this’

(018,21)

References


