

Some General Grammatical Differences between the Modern Germanic Languages with a View to Language History

Ancient and modern Germanic

The recorded history of the Germanic languages is one of diversification. The oldest sources allow for the reconstruction of a fairly uniform pre-historical Germanic with fairly modest internal variation. The attested Old Germanic languages comprise the following: the mostly Scandinavian language of the runic inscriptions (from 2nd c.), Gothic (second half of the 4th c.), Old English, Old Saxon and Old High German (from 8th c.), Old Low Franconian as the forerunner of Dutch (9th c.), Old Norse and Icelandic (from 9th c.), and, but less important, Old Danish and Old Swedish, and Old Frisian (from 13th c.). These languages share, among other things, the following basic systematic traits: four, or five, morphological cases both in pronouns and in full noun phrases: nominative, accusative, dative, genitive and, limited to morphological relics, instrumental; two tenses, i.e., the present and the preterit (the later auxiliary constructions are absent from runic Nordic and Gothic and in a state of emergence at the oldest stages of the other languages); and word, or constituent, order is less restricted or “freer” than later on. Finite verbs may occupy different positions in main, assertive clauses – first (V-1), second (V-2), later (V-3, etc.), last (V-final), relative to subjects and objects.

Disregarding the non-European Germanic diaspora of Yiddish and Afrikaans, the main modern Germanic languages are the following (the approximate number of native speakers is given in parentheses): Icelandic (280,000), Faroese (50,000), Norwegian (4,600,000, with the two main written varieties Riksmål/Bokmål and Nynorsk ‘New-Norwegian’), Swedish (9,000,000), Danish (5,000,000), English (60,000,000 in Europe, 400,000,000 worldwide), (Modern West) Frisian (350,000 in the Dutch provinces Groningen and Vriesland), Dutch (20,000,000), and German (90,000,000).

The history of the development from Old to Modern Germanic is one of structural diversification.

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The position of the finite verb

The position of the finite verb in main and subordinate clauses varies among the modern languages. In main clauses, V-1 signals a yes–no question:

- (1) a. Kommt ('comes') er ('he')? (German)
b. Did he do it?

In modern Icelandic, V-1 survives in narrative main clauses (as in Old Norse):

- (2) Leið nú til sumarmála, fór húsfreyja þá að ógledjast. 'Midsummer approached, and the lady of the mansion began to turn morose.'

In all Germanic languages, V-2 is a mark of declarative main clauses:

- (3) Her mother has arrived.

3rd and later positions are found in English main clauses with a topicalized element:

- (4) a. Today her mother will finally arrive. (V-3)
b. Today, her mother finally arrived. (V-4)

There is more variation of verb position in subordinate clauses but here it is not a functional means of distinguishing between declaratives and questions, but more strictly structural (typological). English and Icelandic (and optionally Faroese) basically have V-2 (not counting the complementiser) in subordinate clauses, as in declarative main clauses:

- (5) ...because he did not buy the book.

Norwegian, Danish, Swedish (and optionally Faroese) subordinate clauses are V-3:

- (6) ...fordi ('because') han ('he') ikke ('not') kjøpte ('bought') boken.
(Norwegian)

German, Dutch and West Frisian subordinate clauses are verb-final (which includes having the finite verb as part of a clause-final verb complex; cf. below):

- (7) ... weil ('because') er ('he') das Buch ('the book') nicht ('not') kaufte ('bought'). (German)

With regard to subordinate clauses, one thus finds a geographical opposition between the continental languages, which have verb-final structures in subordinate clauses, and the other, non-continental, languages that do not. The positions of the finite verb in main clauses differ with regard to pragmatic function (assertion vs. question), whereas the position (positions) of the finite verb in subordinate clauses does (do) not have a similar functional basis.

Verb chains with non-finite verbs

Originally, Germanic had only the two finite tenses present and preterit, and, in addition, an infinitive and present and past (or passive) participles. By processes of grammaticalisation, new periphrastic perfect and passive constructions have come into being since around 800 A.D. Rules for forming more extensive ‘verb chains’, consisting of several verb forms, gradually established themselves. Such verb chains are structured in significantly different ways in the various modern Germanic languages. In the languages without verb-final constructions – Icelandic, Faroese, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, and English – verb chains are in general straightforwardly right-branching, as in (8):

- (8) ...because he **had¹** not **been²** **invited³** to **contribute⁴** to the festschrift.

The languages with verb-final constructions show different structuring of the clause-final verb complex. Modern West Frisian is straightforwardly left-branching:

- (9) ...wêrom't ik de hiele dei **sitten⁴** **bliuwe³** **moatten²** **ha¹**. ‘...why I have had to remain sitting [there] all day long.’

German is basically left-branching but at a certain stage of expansion it adds, under certain conditions, right-branching:

- (10) a. ...weil er gestern Abend **gearbeitet³** **haben²** **soll¹**.
 ‘...because he is reported to have been working yesterday evening.’
 b. ...weil ich den ganzen Tag **habe¹** **arbeiten³** **müssen²**.
 ‘...because I have had to work all day.’
 c. ...weil ich den ganzen Tag **würde¹** **haben²** **sitzen⁵** **bleiben⁴** **müssen³**. ‘...because I would have had to remain sitting [there] all day long.’

Dutch is partly left- and partly right-branching. It has certain restrictions against left-branching which do not apply in German and is therefore more right-branching than German.

- (11) a. ...omdat hij heden niet **zal¹** **komen²**/**komen²** **zal¹**.
 ‘...because he won't come today.’
 b. ...omdat hij gisteravond **zou¹** **zijn²** **gekomen³**/**gekomen³** **zou¹** **zijn²**/**zou¹** **gekomen³** **zijn²**/***gekomen³** **zijn²** **zou¹**
 ‘... because he is reported to have come yesterday.’
 c. ...waarom ik de hele dag **had¹** **moeten²** **blijven³** **zitten⁴**.
 ‘...because I would have had to remain sitting here all day.’

The geographical distribution of the main linearization patterns is illustrated in (12):

(14)

N

IV. Icelandic, Faroese:

- Verb-final
- + NP case Marking

III. English, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish:

- Verb-final
- NP case marking

W

II. Dutch, West Frisian:

- + Verb-final
- NP case marking

E

I. German:

- + Verb-final
- + NP case marking

S

Conclusion

In a universal perspective, Greenberg’s “Universal 41” would seem to favour Type I and it is compatible with Type III and IV. According to “Universal 41”, Type II is disfavoured. Apparently, there exist non-trivial connections between Greenberg’s implicational “Universal 41” and the geographical picture presented in (14).

German, belonging to Type I, is morphologically and syntactically more conservative than the other languages. The North Atlantic languages are morphologically conservative to a greater (Icelandic) or lesser (Faroese) degree but they are arguably less syntactically conservative than German. (Cf. in particular the so-called ‘oblique subjects’ found in these languages, i.e. non-nominative NPs with subject properties associated solely with nominative NPs in German.) The central Mainland Scandinavian and English area belongs to the universally common Type III. The North Sea continental area belongs to the typologically disfavoured Type II. It shares case loss with its Northern and Western neighbours, and verb-final structures with its Southern neighbours. (A similar loss of morphological case has occurred in neighbouring European, Romance and Celtic, languages.) Presumably, the universally non-favoured Type II characteristic of this area is the result of typological contact pressure from the North and West as well as from the South. It is interesting to note that Dutch verb chains show a considerable amount of right-branching, which is the only ordering allowed in the neighbouring Type II languages. In a functional perspective, V-2 in main clauses in languages with verb-final structures may possibly be viewed as the superimposition on basic V-final of V-2 as a topological device for marking declarative function common to all modern Germanic languages.

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