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Corpus-driven testing of a semantico-pragmatic hypothesis

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Recent years have seen a proliferation of studies on “main clause phenomena” in subordinate clauses (Heycock 2007, Aelbrecht, Haegeman, and Nye 2012), among them V2 word order (often called ‘main clause word order’) in Germanic languages. Danish, as well as Swedish and Norwegian, main clause word order is traditionally distinguished from subclause word order on the basis of relative placement of finite verb (V) and sentence adverbials/negations (Adv) (cp. Diderichsen 1946). In spite of terminology, both word orders are found in subclauses:

(1) (det er også en af grundene til) at vi tør næsten ikke at flytte (V>Adv)
 (that is also one of the reasons to) that we dare almost not to move

(1') at vi næsten ikke tør at flytte (Adv>V)
 that we almost not dare to move
 ‘that’s also one of the reasons that we almost don’t dare to move’

Main clause word order in subclauses has been argued to be a signal of relative informational importance, dubbed emphasis (Hooper and Thompson 1973), assertion (Hooper and Thompson 1973, Meinunger 2006, Julien 2007, Hansen and Heltoft 2011), main point of utterance (Simons 2007, Wiklund et al. 2009) and foreground (Jensen and Christensen 2013). Most studies of the word order distinction in Scandinavian are intuition- or judgment-based (see also Heycock, Sorace, and Hansen 2010, Vikner 1995), but considering usage the most important test-bed for semantico-pragmatic hypotheses, we will present the results of a large-scale, corpus-driven study of word order in modern spoken Danish.

The data for this study form part of the LANCHART corpus (<http://lanchart.hum.ku.dk/>), and comprise almost 9,000 subclauses. All subclauses have been manually coded for a range of factors relevant to hypotheses regarding foregrounding, ranging from type of matrix predicate to presence of conjunction, enabling multifactorial analyses of the relative effects on the distribution of the two word orders.

Our results show that V>Adv is much more frequent in subordinate clauses than commonly assumed (amounting to 64% for complement clauses and as much as 88 % in adverbial clauses of causation/reason initiated by *fordi* ‘because’), and even found in contexts where it should be unacceptable according the semantico-pragmatic hypothesis, i.e., clauses under factive predicates (e.g. *være sjovt* ‘be funny’, *ærgre sig over* ‘regret’), generally recognized to presuppose their complements. The distribution is furthermore in direct contrast to some of the formal constraints suggested by intuition-based analyses.

Mixed-effects modelling in R (Baayen 2008) supports the hypothesis that V>Adv signals foregrounded information in complement clauses (Jensen and Christensen 2013), though the factuality or realis value of the subclause content as signalled by the matrix predicate and the complementizer also seems to have an influence which cannot easily be explained by recourse to the notions of fore- and backgrounding.

In this paper we broaden the view and include also results regarding adverbial and relative clauses, still understudied categories of subclauses which have very different syntactic relations to their matrix clauses, requiring a different analysis of foreground and background.

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