

# A Discourse-Based Approach to Verb Placement in Early West-Germanic\*

*Svetlana Petrova*

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

The paper presents a novel approach to explaining word order variation in the early Germanic languages. Initial observations about verb placement as a device marking types of rhetorical relations made on data from Old High German (cf. Hinterhölzl & Petrova 2005) are now reconsidered on a larger scale and compared with evidence from other early Germanic languages. The paper claims that the identification of information-structural domains in a sentence is best achieved by taking into account the interaction between the pragmatic features of discourse referents and properties of discourse organization.

*Keywords:* verb-second, early Germanic, discourse, information structure

## 1 Introduction

In investigating the role of information structure for the development of the word-order regularities of the Germanic languages, Hinterhölzl et al. (2005) observe that the position of the finite verb in 9<sup>th</sup>-century Old High German (henceforth OHG) clearly contributes to the separation of the information-structural domains of *Topic* vs. *Comment* and *Focus* vs. *Background* in the

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utterance on the one hand, as well as to the division of episodes and sub-episodes in the structure of running texts on the other hand. These findings show that verb placement in early Germanic – though subject to much more variation in comparison with the modern varieties of these languages – is by no means random but rather highly sensitive to a complex set of factors pertaining to information packaging and discourse organization as a whole.

These aspects of the function of the finite verb in early Germanic are addressed in Hinterhölzl and Petrova (2005) who take a first attempt at describing word order variation in the early Germanic languages in a dynamic model of discourse relations as outlined in the Segmented Discourse Relation Theory (SDRT) by Asher and Lascarides (2003). On the basis of data from OHG, it is claimed that the position of the finite verb is a device of indicating coordination vs. subordination as the two major types of rhetorical relations distinguished in the theoretical model stated above. This role of verb syntax mainly manifests itself in the opposition of verb-initial vs. verb-second structures in OHG. Verb-initial placement is generally found in sentences providing what is called the main story-line of the narrative and therefore attribute to the coordinating type of rhetorical relations, regardless of the informational status of the discourse referents in terms of the given-new distinction. By contrast, verb-second sentences typically occur in contexts providing additional, for example explanatory or descriptive information on a contextually given entity and therefore constitute discourse parts that are subordinated in text structure.

According to these observations it may be concluded that syntactic patterns other than the basic verb-final order started to emerge in early Germanic for reasons of discourse organization and rhetorical explicitness. Such a hypothesis bears far-reaching consequences concerning the development of the present-day syntax of the Germanic languages. In this respect, the purpose of the present

study is twofold. First, it aims at providing more theoretic and empirical support for the claim that verb syntax in OHG is to great extent a matter of discourse relations and information packaging. Second, the hypothesis of the discourse-functional role of verb placement in early Germanic gained on the basis of material from the OHG period has to be examined from the perspective of other related Germanic languages attested from the same period of time.

## **2 The Initial Hypothesis: The Case of the Old High German Tatian (9th century)**

In order to investigate the role of information structure in the syntax of OHG, Hinterhölzl et al. (2005) pursue an approach that especially concentrates on the relationship between the informational status of discourse referents and the placement of the finite verb in the sentence. For several methodological reasons outlined in Hinterhölzl et al. (2005, pp. 4–6), the empirical basis of the analysis is restricted to such examples from the OHG *Tatian* translation (9<sup>th</sup> century) in which the OHG text differs from the word order of the underlying Latin original. The analysis of the data provides significant points in favour of the interdependence between information structure and verb syntax in OHG. These can be best demonstrated on instances belonging to the presentational/thetic vs. categorical distinction in grammar as outlined in Sasse (1987, 1995) among others.

First, presentational sentences in OHG will be examined. These belong to a pragmatically defined class of sentences used to introduce a new discourse referent into context and thus provide a classical instance of thetic, all-focus structures in which no topic-comment division applies (cf. Drubig 1992; Lambrecht 1994, pp. 127–131, 137–146 and 177–181 on this matter). Here, two

patterns seem to prevail in OHG. In the first one, the finite verb<sup>1</sup> occupies the position at the beginning of the entire sentence as in (1 a), whereas in the second one the verb is preceded only by a frame adverbial like OHG *tho* ‘then’, *thar* ‘there’ etc., see (1 b):

- (1) a. OHG uuas thar ouh sum uuitua (T 201, 2)  
 Lat. vidua autem quaedam erat  
 ‘There was a widow there too’
- b. OHG tho uuas man In hierusalem.(T 37, 23)  
 Lat. homo erat In hierusalem.  
 ‘There was a man in Jerusalem’

Despite of the syntactic differences at the left periphery of these sentences, they nevertheless have one important property in common: both types place the new referent **after** the finite verb, see OHG *sum uuitua* ‘a widow’ in (1 a) and OHG *man* ‘a man’ in (1 b), thus making clear that the post-verbal position is associated with the discourse-new property of sentence constituents. Furthermore, there is evidence leading to the assumption that the pattern in (1 a) is preferred over that in (1 b) in presentational contexts in OHG. Most revealing is the fact that in numerous examples of presentational sentences, frame adverbials are found post-verbally as well, especially when added against the Latin original, see OHG *thar* in (1 a). From this we may conclude that the initial position of the finite verb is strongly associated with the functional type of presentational, orthetic/all-focus sentences in the early period of German.

By contrast, categorical sentences providing a comment on a discourse-given or contextually inferable referent are systematically realized as verb-

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<sup>1</sup> The finite verb in both OHG and Latin, as well as in all instances from other early Germanic dialects considered later in this paper, is underlined for clarity. A slash stands for end of verse or text line according to the graphical representation of the instances in the manuscripts respectively.

second structures in OHG against various word order patterns occurring in the Latin original, see (2 a–b):

- (2) a. OHG *ih bin guot hirti. guot hirti/ tuot sina sela furi siniu scaph.* (T 225, 16-17)  
 Lat. *ego sum pastor bonus. bonus pastor/ animam suam dat pro ouibus suis*  
 ‘I am a good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his soul for his sheep.’
- b. OHG *Inti ira namo uuas elisab&h* (T 26,2)  
 Lat. *& nomen eius elisab&h*  
 ‘and her name was Elizabeth’

A general property of the verb-second instances in (2) distinguishing them from the structures in (1 b) consists in the type of phrase that occupies the pre-verbal position. In verb-second structures of the categorical kind as in (2), the position preceding the finite verb is fixed to the constituent functioning as the aboutness-topic of the utterance (cf. Reinhart 1981).

The analysis provided on instances of the *thetic* vs. *categorical* distinction shows that in OHG the position of the finite verb exhibits a strong sensitivity towards the informational status of the discourse referents. It further allows for an initial generalization concerning the placement of the finite verb in early German as well. In all cases considered above, the finite verb occupies one and the same position, namely the one at the beginning of the new-information focus domain. This generalization may be represented as in (3):

- (3) **thetic** a. FOC[**Vfin** ... DR<sub>new</sub> ...]  
 b. Frame FOC[**Vfin** ... DR<sub>new</sub> ...]  
**categorical** TOP[DR<sub>giv</sub>] FOC[**Vfin** ...]

This situation provides strong evidence for a post-verbal position of new-information focus in OHG. However, given this conclusion, we are in need of an explanation for verb-initial structures containing discourse-given material which is viewed to belong to the background of the utterance, see (4) below. Moreover, the definite expression *ther phariseus* ‘this Pharisee’ is a suitable topic candidate but nevertheless fails to occupy the position at the left periphery of the sentence as topic expressions in categorical sentences do, see (2) above:

- (4) OHG bigonda ther phariseus innan imo/ ahtonti quedan (T 126, 5f.)  
 Lat. **P**hariseus autem coepit intra se/ reputans dicere  
 ‘This Pharisee began to speak thinking by himself’

On closer inspection, it turns out that verb-initial structures containing discourse-given material show a clear positional and functional distribution in OHG. First of all, they typically occur in text-initial sentences or at the beginning of new episodes as in (5 a–b):

- (5) a. OHG uuard thô gitân In then tagon (T 35, 7)  
 Lat. **F**actum est autem In diebus illis’  
 ‘[It] happened in those days’
- b. OHG Intfiengun sie tho thes heilantes lichamon (T 321, 29)  
 Lat. Acceperunt autem corpus ihesu  
 ‘Then they took the body of Jesus’

Episode onsets, for instance the shift to another place of reference in the source text of the New Testament, are signalled by concordance notes in the left-hand margins of the Latin column or between the Latin and the OHG text. Additionally, the beginning of a new paragraph is often marked graphically in the Latin part of the manuscript by using bald capital letters as shown in (4) and (5 a–b); see also Picture 1 and 2 in the Appendix. This strategy to mark the

beginning of new text units and thus to distinguish coherent parts in written discourse by means of punctuation and graphical representation is typical for the text production in early medieval times, especially in Carolingian manuscripts of both Latin and vernacular texts (cf. Bästlein 1991, p. 59 and pp. 214–242). As for the manuscript of the OHG Tatian, it has been observed in previous research that this strategy of dividing episodes and sub-episodes through initial capital letters predominantly applies for the Latin section of the text and only rarely occurs in the OHG part (Simmler 1998, pp. 306–307). At the same time, we now observe that the graphical distinction of new episodes in the Latin original correlates with the regular pre-posing of the finite verb in the OHG translation. This simply implies that the syntactic means of verb fronting systematically applies for marking episode onsets in OHG as a functional equivalent of the graphical highlighting of corresponding lines in the Latin original. To support this view, we shall pay attention to the fact that exactly on episode onsets, not only full DPs as in (4) but also pronominal subjects inserted against the Latin original (cf. OHG *sie* ‘they’ in (5 b)) have to follow the sentence-initial verb form.

Furthermore, verb-initial structures with discourse-given material regularly occur with certain groups of main verb predicates. The most common among these are motion verbs (6 a), verbs of saying (6 b) as well as verbs of sensual or cognitive perception (6 c), the latter especially encoding an inchoative meaning, that is, implying the initiation of a new state of affairs (6 d):

- (6) a. OHG quam thara gotes engil (T 35, 32)  
 Lat. & ecce angelus domini  
 ‘There appeared God’s angel’
- b. OHG antlingota tho ther engil (T 28, 26)  
 Lat. & respondens angelus  
 ‘Then the angel responded’

- c. OHG furstuont siu thó in ira lihhamen/ thaz siu heil uuas fon theru suhti (T 95, 14f.)  
 Lat. & sensit corpore/ quod sanata ess& a plaga  
 ‘Then she felt in her body that she was recovered from this plague’
- d. OHG giloubta ther man themo uuorte (T 90, 24)  
 Lat. credidit homo semoni  
 ‘The man believed (=started to believe) in this statement’

How can the initial position of the finite verb in these examples containing discourse-given material be re-unified with the fact that the same structure occurs in presentational sentences with brand-new referents as well? A plausible explanation of this phenomenon can be gained if next to the informational status of referents, discourse relations among sentences are considered as well. This can help to avoid the practice of directly associating pragmatically given material with *Topic* as well as of restricting *Focus* to contextually new information only. From the point of view of discourse organization, it becomes clear that examples (4)–(6) do not act as categorical sentences providing comments on a given referent but rather act as event-reporting sentences answering implicit questions like “What happened then?/How does the story go on?” etc. This makes clear that the discourse referents contained in the instances under scrutiny are not mentioned as the starting point, or the *Topic* of the utterances but just as being involved in the new state of affairs reported here. From this perspective, sentences (4)–(6) have to be viewed as all-focus sentences just like the presentational ones given in (1). Since the post-verbal position is associated with new-information focus as shown in (3) above, fronting of the finite verb in those sentences may be viewed as a special strategy used to highlight the entire proposition and to disable a topic-comment reading, especially whenever discourse-given material is contained in a sentence.



A further argument in favour of this account on verb-initial placement in OHG comes from the lexical meaning of the predicate groups involved. Since these affect the main indices providing the deictic orientation of a situation, these being ‘place’, ‘time’ and ‘participant’, they can be attributed to an overall function of indicating a change within the narrative situation of the text<sup>2</sup>. According to these considerations, the presentational sentences in (1) are part of a subset of sentences establishing a new situation by introducing new participants to the discourse. This observation well fits into the fact that the shift of place and/or participant of the action is a typical instance in which episode onset is marked by initial capital letters in Carolingian manuscripts (cf. Bästlein 1991, p. 168 and p. 192).

These observations show that verb placement in OHG correlates not only with the informational status of the referents in the sentence but with discourse organization as well. In all cases, verb-initial placement occurs in instances bearing distinctive features of theticity like wide (sentence) focus and no topic-comment structure. So it is the role of the sentence in the context, that is, discourse organization proper, that provides crucial criteria for deciding whether a context-given discourse referent makes up the topic of the sentence or whether the same constituent belongs to the domain of wide (sentence) focus of the utterance despite of its informational status.

In order to explain the role of verb placement in OHG, I invoke the distinction between coordinating and subordinating discourse relations as developed by Asher and Lascarides (2003) and claim that at a certain stage in the history of German, the position of the verb was a means for distinguishing the type of rhetorical relation the sentence implies with respect to the previous context.

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<sup>2</sup> I am thankful to Roland Hinterhölzl (p.c.) for drawing my attention at this consideration.

The discourse analysis of the data given above gives rise to assume the following distribution of word order patterns in OHG:

- **verb-second** placement occurs in topic-comment structures that serve the conditions of Elaboration or Explanation on another utterance situated higher in discourse hierarchy; this pattern therefore marks relations of **subordination** in context. In particular, it marks chains of subsequent utterances being equally situated on a lower level of dependency, that is, the relation of Continuation;
- by contrast, **verb-initial** placement goes with **coordination** whose prototypical case – Narration – serves to carry further the discourse by providing chronologically sequenced units and establishing no dependency relation among the units involved. Following this, it can be said that Narration provides the level of main action in text structure. It either constructs the basis for subsequent Elaboration or Explanation as in the case of presentational or text-initial sentences, or it signals that a previous sequence of Continuation is suspended and discourse proceeds from a lower to a higher level of narrative structure as in the case of verb-initial sentences with discourse-given material, for instance in episode onsets.

Crucial support for the association of word order patterns with types of rhetorical relations as done above comes from the kind of temporal order between the sentences as one of the most important criteria in distinguishing coordination vs. subordination outlined in Asher and View (2005). In the case of topic-comment sentences in (2), explanatory or supportive information like description, characterization, motivation etc. is provided on a discourse referent or action previously mentioned. Consequently, events described in these structures temporally overlap with the state of affairs of the preceding sentence. This is rather different with the verb-initial sentences in (4)–(6) which clearly contribute to the temporal progression of the narrative, regularly marked by the

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connective OHG *tho* ‘then’. So simultaneity in subordination vs. temporal succession in coordination are two aspects of discourse organization that can be well observed in the OHG examples presented above.

### 3 Comparison to Other Early Germanic Languages

#### 3.1 Methodological issues

The hypothesis about the role of verb placement as a discourse-structuring device in OHG would gain strong support if it turned to hold in other early Germanic languages as well. In order to check this, it is necessary to compare the results gained from the analysis of the OHG material to other early Germanic dialects attested.

In the present study, texts from Old English (OE) and Old Saxon (OS) attested nearly from the same period of time as the OHG *Tatian* are taken into consideration. Brief accounts on the precise age and some general properties of the texts investigated from these dialects will be given at the beginning of the sections, respectively. Other early Germanic dialects, for example the Gothic or Old Norse records, have to be excluded from the analysis for methodological reasons.

Gothic, which apart from the runic inscriptions provides us with the earliest written records of the Germanic group, leaves only little ground for any reliable conclusions about authentic word order. The basic text of the corpus, the translation of the New Testament from Greek made by Wulfila in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and attested in fragments of copies from the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Braune & Heidermanns 2004, § E5, p. 6), shows an overwhelming identity with the word order of the parallel Greek text. If this is indeed the text taken as the source for the Gothic translation, future work could address especially sentences deviating from the syntactic structure of the Greek original, an approach similar to the one

pursued for the OHG *Tatian* above. According to Fourquet (1938, pp. 234–281), such sentences in Gothic really exist. A full sample of these would provide a basis for a subsequent analysis of verb placement, too.

Old Norse, on the other hand, although exhibiting a rich amount of authentic text material, starts its written records only very late, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Ranke & Hofmann 1988, pp. 13–18), that is, at a time at which in other Germanic dialects we already speak of Middle High German or Middle English respectively. Moreover, most of the prose is attested to us in copies of a later time; innovation in the language, for example, in the field of syntax is not excluded since the texts were not memorized but written down freely (cf. Ranke & Hofmann 1988, p. 16; Rögnvaldsson 1996, p. 59)<sup>3</sup>. This explains why a relatively rigid verb-second order in main clauses and little variation in verb placement according to the criteria of discourse organization were discovered in sketchy examinations of the ON prose material done for the purpose of the present study. A notable exception is the verb-initial placement in declarative sentences, also called ‘narrative inversion’ (cf. Heusler 1967, § 508, p. 173 and Sigurðson 1994) which often applies within a passage of related and chronologically successive events. It has already been noted in previous literature that verb placement takes the role of linking events to consistent units of running discourse called ‘periods’ according to the ancient Latin syntactic tradition, see Kusmenko (1996) and Donhauser et al. (to appear). However, this phenomenon turns out to be at present in OS too and will be discussed in more detail in 3.3 below.

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<sup>3</sup> A different picture may be obtained from the examination of the ON poetic records. These texts were created much earlier (9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century) and are said to preserve the forms and structures of the language at the stage of their creation due to the fact of being memorized and transmitted through time without any changes (Ranke & Hofmann 1988, p. 18). However, the effort of examining poetic texts of the ON record could not be taken at this stage of the investigation.

## 3.2 Old English

### 3.2.1 Some previous accounts

In both language typology and diachronic text linguistics, OE has received much attention as a good example for exploring various strategies of foregrounding and backgrounding in discourse structure. A great amount of work deals with the role of the connectives in running discourse, among which the most prominent one – OE *þa* ‘then’ – was lately viewed by Enkvist and Wårvik (1987) in their analysis of several OE prose texts to be a special marker of foregrounding in discourse since it either signals main-line sequentiality or serves to highlight narratively important conditions. In recent generative work on diachronic Germanic syntax, the connective OE *þa* has also gained sufficient attention as a special discourse operator (cf. van Kemenade 1997, p. 333) triggering regular verb-second patterns in OE, though the pragmatic function as well as the theoretic status of the connective as an operator proper needs further specification (cf. van Kemenade 2005).

Further properties of text organization in OE prose are investigated by Hopper (1979 a, b) who observes that word order – especially verb placement – is a fundamental means for signaling foregrounding vs. backgrounding in discourse. In his analysis of the OE *Anglo-Saxon (Parker) Chronicle*, Hopper (1979 a, pp. 48–56) claims that sentences bearing distinctive features of foregrounding in discourse like dynamic, punctual verb meaning, temporal progression, etc. regularly exhibit verb-final order (OV), whereas structures attributed to the function of providing background, or supportive information through durative predicates in temporal relations of simultaneity to main actions tend to advance the verb to a position at or near the beginning of the sentence. One of the patterns well exhibited here is the SVO order in explanatory or descriptive (thus background) sequences on a pre-established topic constituent.

Besides this, Hopper observes verb-initial order in introductory sentences in OE. These he interprets as instances of backgrounding since they “set the scene for the main action” (p. 53) in subsequent OV-instances of foregrounding (cf. also p. 49). Nevertheless, Hopper discovers a principled mismatch between discourse function and verb placement in OE as described above and his own observations on Malay provided in the same paper (cf. pp. 40–49). According to these, Malay uses verb-initial placement next to morphological marking (suffix *lah* added to the fronted verb) in foregrounding sentences (cf. p. 44), whereas in OE the same structure turns out to signal background in introductory sentences.

In another paper Hopper (1979 b, pp. 221–226) offers a slightly different account on the distribution of verb placement as a text-structuring device in OE prose. He still regards background as marked by medial verb placement as in SVO order (p. 222) whereas foregrounding is now said to be generally characterized by peripheral verb placement, including both verb-final and verb-initial. The distribution of these two types of verb pattern in foregrounding is further specified by “discourse considerations” (p. 221): verb-initial is viewed to occur in introductory parts, that is, at the beginning of new episodes, whereas verb-final is bound to episode-internal sentences. Nevertheless, according to Hopper (p. 221), the choice for the one or the other verb-peripheral pattern seems to be rather arbitrary.

This shows that the picture concerning the analysis of OE prose is rather unclear and has to be reconsidered on the basis of further evidence from the same period. Moreover, the basic means providing foregrounding in OE in the model suggested by Hopper concerns verb-final – a pattern that has not been mentioned in the discussion of the matter for OHG above. Therefore, it is of interest to look whether this is a principled difference between the two languages in the way they utilize verb placement for discourse-structural purposes.

### 3.2.2 An alternative approach: discourse functions of verb placement in the OE *Beowulf*

In the present analysis, the contexts and factors described as favouring verb-initial vs. verb-second placement in OHG *Tatian* above are reconsidered on the basis of data from the OE *Beowulf*, the oldest epic narrative of all early Germanic literature. The text, comprising some 3.000 alliterative lines, is composed in the 8<sup>th</sup> century in the Anglian dialect and written down in the later half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century in Late West Saxon – the standard OE dialect at that time – though a number of original Anglian forms remain (cf. Lehnert 1960, vol. I, p. 43).

Starting with a review of typical verb-first occurrences in OE *Beowulf*, it is important to note that these are in no way rare or uncommon for this text of the Early Germanic period. First of all, and quite similar to the picture drawn for OE prose by Hopper (1979 a, b) and described for OHG above, *Beowulf* tends to expose instances of verb-initial placement regularly in text-initial position as well as at the beginning of a new text section. New chapters called ‘fits’ are easily detected in *Beowulf* since they are marked by Roman numbers in the manuscript (cf. Bästlein 1991, pp. 214–216). At the beginning of such chapters, verb-initial placement goes with all types of main-verb predicates. So in (7 a) the sentence at the beginning of a fit XII describes a statal (durative) condition, whereas in (7 b) the predicate at the beginning of fit XIX clearly describes a punctual event:

- (7) a. OE Nolde eorla hleo [...] / cwealm-cuman cwicne forlætan (Beow 791f.)  
 ‘The protector of the warriors did not wish to let the monster go alive’
- b. OE SIgon þa | to slæpe (Beow 1252)  
 ‘They sank then to sleep’

Next to their occurrence at episode onsets, verb-initial structures in *Beowulf* tend to appear frequently with certain groups of main-verb predicates, which is another striking parallelism to the situation described for OHG above. The overall impression gained from the analysis of these structures in OE is that they occur exactly in cases where the plot enters a new stage of development or the narration needs to be pushed forward. Among the cases of verb-first placement in such contexts, motion verbs constitute the overwhelming part. In such instances, both discourse-given and discourse-new referents are involved, see (8 a) vs. (8 b). Note that in (8 b) *Wealhtheow*, the wife of the Danish king *Hrothgar*, is mentioned for the first time in the narrative:

- (8) a. OE Com þa | to lande lid-manna helm (Beow 1623)  
 ‘Then the protector of the sailors approached to the shore’
- b. OE eode wealh-þeow forð cwen hroð-gares (Beow 613)  
 ‘Then came *Wealhtheow*, *Hrothgar*’s wife’

Further verb-initial structures containing motion verbs are found 5 times at the beginning of a new fit (II, XVII, XXVII, XXVIII and XXXV). One of these occurrences – the beginning of fit XXVII – is provided as an example in (9):

- (9) OE CWOM þa | to flode fela modigra/ hæg-stealdra (Beow 1889f.)  
 ‘The heap of warriors came then to the sea’

Verb-initial order is also common with verbs of saying or perception verbs appearing both at the beginning of fits, see (10 a)–(11 a), but regularly within some, too, see (10 b)–(11 b). Obviously, these sentences share the property of relating an unexpected but extraordinary important event or action, ex. a turning point in the course of the events. This is at best shown in (11 a) narrating how



Beowulf suddenly detects a weapon with which he is going to win the battle against Grendels' mother:

- (10) a. OE Heht ða þæt heaðo-weorc to hagan biodan (Beow 2893)  
 'He ordered to announce that battle-toil'
- b. OE Spræc/ ða ides scyldinga (Beow 1170f.)  
 'Then queen of the Danes spoke'
- (11) a. OE GE-seah ða on | searwum sige-eadig bil (Beow 1558)  
 'In the middle of the battle he saw a triumphant blade'
- b. OE geseah | ða/ sige-hreðig [...] maððum-sigla (Beow 2756f.)  
 'Then the hero saw a treasure'

As with verbs of saying, the verb-second structure as in (12) below also occurs. A typical property of this type of expression is that a discourse-given referent, mainly a changing interlocutor in a dialogue, is placed before the verb and an apposition follows it. However, this type of structure seems to be restricted to the verb OE *mapelian* 'say, speak', here in the form of the 3sg. preterit *maðelode*, see also Todt (1894, p. 237), a fact providing indications for a kind of idiomatic expression standing beyond the analysis of word order variation in this functional domain:

- (12) OE Bio-wulf maðelode bearn ecg-ðioes (Beow 1999)  
 'Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow'

Furthermore, verb-initial order also correlates with different main verbs sharing the property of perfective, punctual semantics which – used within a fit – denote the initiation of a new state of affairs. Due to their aspectual properties, these verbs take the function of dividing the chapter into sub-episodes and smaller

text-units and are especially suitable to signal new situations and progress in narration:

- (13) a. OE Gesæt ða on næsse niðheard cyning (Beow 2417)  
 ‘Then, the brave (proven in troubles) king sat down on the earth’
- b. OE aras þa se rica (Beow 399)  
 ‘Then this hero stood up’
- c. OE bær þa seo brim-/wyl [...] aringa þengel to/ hofe sinum (Beow 1506f.)  
 ‘Then the brine-wolf brought the lord of rings to her lair’

Also in striking parallelism to the picture drawn for OHG above, all verb-initial structures in the cases considered so far contain frame adverbials like OE *þa* ‘then’ placed **after** the verb. Verb-initial order as an indication of a change within the narrative setting is thus preserved, see (7 b), (8 a), (9), (10 a–b), (11 a–b) as well as (13 a–c). Next to such cases, instances of verb-second order introduced by initial *þa* as in (14) co-occur in all the functions and context described for verb-initial sentences so far:

- (14) a. OE Ða com of more under mist-hleopum/ grendel gongan (Beow 710f.)  
 ‘Then from the moorland, by misty crags, Grendel came’
- b. OE Ða wæs swigra secg sunu/ ecglafes (Beow 980f.)  
 ‘Then this man, the son of Ecglaf, became more silent’

To sum up, the initial position of the finite verb in both the functional domains and with the predicate groups distinguished as triggers of the same structure in OHG appears to be a wide-spread pattern in the OE *Beowulf* as well. In previous literature, fronting of a finite verb before any other argument position in OE has already been associated with the purpose of highlighting “a new or surprising

subject” (Stockwell 1984, p. 576). Due to the property of the verb-initial sentences to carry further the discourse, especially in episode onsets, we may now extend the function of verb-initial placement to the function of focussing not only the subject but the entire proposition. That the picture drawn for OE is a realistic one gains support from the fact that several of the constructions involving a post-verbal subject in present-day English appear exactly in the conditions discovered for the older stage of this language, too. Presentational and existential contexts, motion verbs, verbs of saying after citations etc. are the most prominent among these (cf. Green 1980; Stockwell 1984, pp. 579–583; Hansen 1987, p. 202). This syntactic peculiarity of present-day English may now be viewed as a remnant of a general word order strategy used to signal sentence focus, or progress in narration in the older stages of the language.

Turning to sentences of the categorical kind and comparing the results from OE with the preferred verb-second placement in such contexts in OHG, we encounter a basic difference between the two languages. The verb-second pattern with a left-peripheral topic constituent dominating in this pragmatic domain in OHG is indeed found in part of the evidence from OE. This is the case in (15) which clearly allows for an interpretation as an identificational sentence answering the preceding question “Who are you?”:

- (15) OE *we | synt gum-cynnes/ geata leode* (Beow 260f.)  
 ‘We are by kin of the clan of Geats’

The same kind of topic marking also occurs in parenthetic constructions providing additional information on an entity just mentioned:

- (16) OE *wulfgar mapeleode þæt wæs wendla leod* (Beow 348)  
 ‘Wulfgar spoke – this was the Wendles' chieftain’

Due to the pragmatic status of the referents and on the basis of discourse interpretation, it can be concluded that the finite verb in structures of the type in (15) and (16) is set to distinguish the aboutness-topic from the new information supplied by the rest of the sentence.

Nevertheless, patterns other than verb-second also appear in categorical sentences of OE. Consider the following example in (17):

- context: *het ða in beran eafor-/ heafod-segn. heaðo-steapne helm/ hare byrnan guð-sweord geato-lic/ gyd æfter wræc*  
 ‘Then he [=Beowulf] ordered to bring him the boar-head standard, the high battle-helm, and the gray breastplate, the splendid sword, then he spoke:’
- (17) OE *me | ðis hilde-sceorp/ hroðgâr sealde* (Beow 2155)  
 ‘These ornaments of war were given to me by Hrothgar’

A short characterization of the situation is crucial for the understanding and the proper information-structural analysis of this example: after his return to his home land, Beowulf relates his adventures with the Danes and is eager to present the gifts that he has obtained from them as an award for his successful fight against Grendel. So he asks to bring these gifts and as they lay in front of his counterparts, he utters the sentence quoted in (17). Thus, the context of this text passage bears strong indications for the interpretation of the sentence as a categorical one. It is also clear that the definite expression OE *ðis hildesceorp* ‘these ornaments of war’ best qualifies to be the aboutness-topic of the utterance, for it refers to a previously mentioned referent and is expected to be the starting point of a sentence providing more information on it. However, this constituent is not separated from the rest of the utterance by means of verb placement as demonstrated for the parallel cases in (2) from OHG and (15)–(16) from OE. Rather, the aboutness-topic of the utterance in (17) shares the same syntactic domain with referents belonging to different information-structural

categories, for example the familiarity topic OE *me* ‘me/to me’ as well as the focus of the sentence, the donor of the weapons *hroðgâr* ‘Hrothgar’.

The examples discussed in this section provide important points for the evaluation of the interaction of verb placement and discourse relation in OE. On the one hand, the cases of verb-initial structure confirm the findings for OHG. On the other hand – and in clear opposition to the OHG facts – relations of subordination turn out to be not obligatorily fixed to verb-second placement in OE. Cases like the one discussed in (17) show that verb-final structures in OE, against the claims of Hopper (1979 a, b), are also found in sequences providing supportive, or descriptive information and thus belong to the parts representing the background of the narration.

### 3.3 Old Saxon

After having pointed at a crucial difference between the syntactic realization of categorical sentences in OHG and OE, we turn to the investigation of evidence from the OS period. The data is based on the most representative text of the OS corpus – the *Heliand* – a 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup>-century poetic gospel harmony comprising 5.983 alliterative lines (cf. Rauch 1992, p. 1).

It has been pointed out in previous literature that patterns in which the finite verb precedes all arguments in main clauses are extremely frequent in OS syntax. Rauch (1992) estimates sentences initiated by a particle followed immediately by the finite verb to be the most common pattern in OS and therefore accounts them to be “[t]he unmarked word order of the OS independent declarative sentence” (p. 24), followed in number by ‘pure’ verb-first sentences. As early as in the revealing work of Ries (1880), the kind of logical relations between sentences in context have explicitly been accounted for as the main factor triggering this kind of fronting of the finite verb in OS.

Looking at the correlation between the finite verb form and the informational status of discourse referents, we encounter a slightly different situation in OS in comparison to OHG. On the one hand, in presentational contexts, the type of verb-second preceded by a frame adverbial in initial position as in (18 a–b) seems to be more frequent than verb-initial sentences as in (19) thus establishing a quantitative relation opposite to that of the same patterns in OHG:

- (18) a. OS than uuas thar en gigamalod mann (Hel 72)  
 ‘Then it was an old-aged man there’
- b. OS Than uuas thar en uuttig man (Hel 569)  
 ‘There was a wise man there’
- (19) OS Lag thar en felis biouan (Hel 4075)  
 ‘A stone lay there upon [the entry of the tomb]’

On the other hand, categorical sentences – for example those directly following presentational ones – exhibit the structure established for OHG already, that is, they use to fill a single position before the finite verb form with the topic of the utterance, most usually in form of an anaphoric pronoun referring backwards to the entity just introduced to context, see (20):

- (20) a. OS that uuas fruod gomo (Hel 73)  
 ‘that was a wise man’
- b. OS That uuas so salig man (Hel 76)  
 ‘This was such a blessed man’

This situation leads to some conclusions about the interaction between information structure and syntax in OS. First, it points at a higher stage of generalization of the verb-second rule in OS as this structure appears in different contextual types of main sentences despite of the type of constituents or the

informational status of the referents involved. Second, it shows that new information in all cases follows the finite verb and therefore confirms the view of a right-peripheral focus domain in early Germanic as stated so far. This is also demonstrated by other instances bearing a brand-new referent, for example in the object position of a transitive verb, see (21):

- (21) OS Thar fundun sea enna godan man (Hel 463)  
 ‘There, they found a good man’

Although verb-initial instances turn out to be less frequent in presentational contexts in OS, it is interesting to look for further utilizations of verb fronting aside from these classical cases of all-focus sentences. As a matter of fact, such instances really occur in OS exactly in the conditions under which they systematically appear in OHG and OE discussed above. Also quite similar to the situation in these languages, verb-initial placement in all occasions is doubled by the verb-second patterns with a preceding frame adverbial as an optional variant in the same pragmatic domains.

First, we shall turn to sentences at the beginning of a new text section. There is no problem to isolate such instances in *Heliand* as the text is divided in chapters termed ‘fits’ (‘vittea’) in the Latin preface of the poem. Verb-initial structures occur with all sorts of predicates describing both states and actions, see (22 a–b) vs. (22 c–d):

- (22) a. OS Habda im the engil godes al giuuîsid [...] (Hel 427)  
 ‘The angel of god had shown all to them’
- b. OS Stod imu tho fora themu uuihe uualdandeo Crist (Hel 3758)  
 ‘Then the almighty Christ stood in front of the temple’
- c. OS Giuuet imu tho that barn godes innan Bethania (Hel 4198)  
 ‘Then this child of God went to Bethany’

- d. OS Vurdun tho thea liudi umbi thea lera Cristes/ umbi thiu uuord an geuine (Hel 3926f.)  
 ‘Then, these people became wandering about the message of these words’

Second, verb-initial structures regularly occur in sentences containing the predicate groups distinguished as triggers of verb-initial placement in OHG above. Like in OE, the most common examples are provided by sentences containing motion verbs. In general, these occupy the initial position in the sentence despite of the pragmatic status of the referent involved or the position of the utterance in global text structure. As (23 a) vs. (23 b–c) show, both discourse-new and discourse-given referents are found in post-verbal position, and only (23 b) is one at the beginning of a new fit, the rest of the examples signal a change of the situation within one and the same episode:

- (23) a. OS Tho quam thar oc en uuif gangan (Hel 503)  
 ‘Then, a woman came there, too’
- b. OS Giuuitun im tho eft an Galilealand Ioseph endi Maria (Hel 780)  
 ‘Joseph and Mary went to the land of Galilee’
- c. OS Forun thea bodon obar all (Hel 349)  
 ‘The messengers went all over the country’

Further, verbs of saying also regularly occur in sentence-initial position, see (24 a–b). Verb-second order after a frame adverbial is functionally equal in such contexts, see (24 c):

- (24) a. OS Hiet man that alla thea elilenduun man iro odil sohtin (Hel 345)  
 ‘It was ordered that all these foreign people should go to their native country’
- b. OS Het imu helpen tho/ uualdandeo Krist (Hel 4101f.)  
 ‘The almighty Christ ordered to help him’



- c. OS Thô sprak thar en gifrodot man (Hel 208)  
 ‘Then a wise man spoke there’

Finally, predicates pointing at the beginning of a new physical or cognitive state of affairs on a discourse-given referent regularly expose the verb-initial structure, see (25 a–b); verb-second order after a frame adverbial is again an equivalent to that, too:

- (25) a. OS uuarð ald gumo / sprâka bilôsit (Hel 172f.)  
 ‘The old man became bereft of speech’
- b. OS Uuard Mariun tho mod an sorgun (Hel 803)  
 ‘Then, Mary became anxious’
- c. OS Thô uuarð hugi Iosepes, / is môd giuorrid (Hel 295f.)  
 ‘Then, Joseph became worried’

Apart from these instances in which – quite similar to the other investigated old Germanic languages – OS makes use of initial verb placement to signal progress in narration, OS itself offers a number of special cases in this direction.

One of the peculiarities of OS is the use of the verb-initial pattern in explanatory parts of the narration denoting durative conditions on a discourse-given referent. Due to the criteria for distinguishing types of discourse relations in text hierarchy described in section 2, such cases should be classified into the domain of subordination in discourse covered by the verb-second pattern in the OHG, OS and part of the OE data analyzed before. However, the OS data give reason to believe that pre-posing of the verb in explanatory parts of the narration does not occur randomly but applies exactly in sentences announcing an outstandingly important event or property, that is, a state of affairs which is crucial for the further development of the narrative (cf. Ries 1880, p. 19 for a similar interpretation of such instances). Applying our previous account on cases

like these, we may conclude that fronting of the finite verb to the beginning of the sentences is a syntactic means used to highlight the importance of the entire proposition in relations to the surrounding units of discourse. Verb-first and verb-second patterns form an interesting opposition, as will be shown by the following examples taken from story about the nativity of John the Baptist (Luke 1):

- (26) OS a. Than uuas thar en gigamalod mann,/ b. that uuas froud gomo [...] c. That uuas so salig man/ [...] d. Uuas im thoh an sorogon hugi,/ that sea erbiuard egan ni moustun (Hel 72–86)  
 ‘Then, there was an old-aged man, this was a wise man [...] This was such a blessed man [...] But they had great sorrow, for they had no child’

In the categorical sentences in (26 b and c) providing additional information about the discourse referent introduced in (26 a), the verb-second pattern in structures distinguishing the information-structural domains of *Topic* and *Focus* by means of verb placement applies. In (26 d), a characterization of the referent is given which is more important than the already provided information about his age and his wisdom. Zachariah’s and Elizabeth’s lack of a child is crucial for the further development of the story; it is a condition which is going to change and to motivate a chain of subsequent events constituting the further course of the narrative.

So in this case, a special utilization of verb fronting as a signal of sentence focus appears. Whenever an important feature of a referent, or a crucial event of the story is narrated, the language switches to verb-initial placement in order to highlight the whole proposition and to set it up against other, not so important parts of the discourse.

As a further peculiarity of OS, verb-initial placement appears not only at episode edges but within episodes of temporally successive events called

‘periods’ according to the ancient grammatical tradition (cf. Kusmenko 1996, 147). This phenomenon of verb syntax in early Germanic is already known and described for Old Norse prose (Heusler 1967, §508, p. 173; Kusmenko 1996, 150–153 and Donhauser et al., to appear). Consider the following example:

- (27) OS a. Thô uuarð thar an thene gastseli / megincraft mikil manno gisamnod [...] b. Quâmun managa / Iudeon an thene gastseli; c. uuarð im thar gladmôd hugi, / [...] d. Drôg man uuîn an flet / [...] e. Uuas thes an lustun landes hirdi [...] / f. Hêt he thô gangen forð gêla thiornun (Hel 2733 – 2745)  
 ‘a. There was a mighty crowd of men gathered together in the guest hall [...] b. Many people came to that guest hall [...]; c. there they became glad-hearted [...]. d. Wine was brought to the room [...]. e. The herdsman of the land bethought him with joy [...] / f. He ordered to go for the gay maiden’

The example gives a chain of chronologically ordered events all exposing no dependency relation among each other but being equally situated on the layer of main action. In a case like this, we observe a classical instance of Narration as a prototypical example of rhetorical relations of the coordinative kind. Again, verb-initial placement signals that each sentence in a narrative chain like the one in (27) reports a new event and thus forms an all-focus instance by itself in which no topic-comment distinction applies.

It is a peculiarity of OS that although verb-second order seems to prevail in main sentences of different pragmatic classes, verb-initial placement nevertheless systematically applies as a means of establishing main-line sequentiality and sentence focus both on episode onsets as well as within episodes.

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## 4 Conclusion

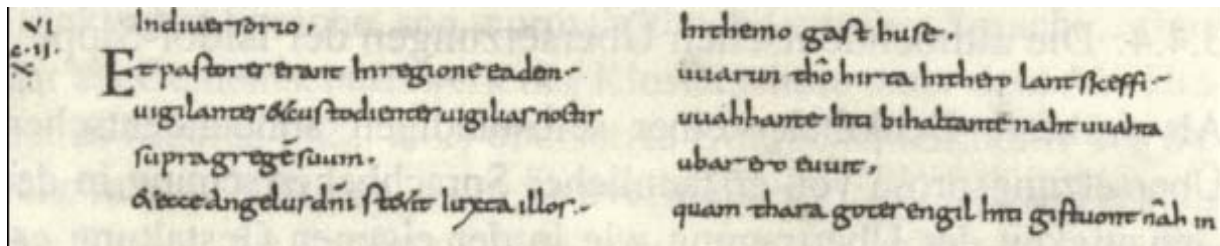
The most important conclusion of the foregoing investigation is that apart from OHG, other older Germanic dialects also provide evidence for the claim that verb placement plays a role as a text-structuring device in early Germanic. In other Germanic languages, verb-initial instances show up more or less regularly in the functional domains outlined for OHG and associated with coordinative linking in discourse, though with a slightly different distribution and frequency. A crucial domain of difference among the early Germanic situation was discovered in the field of rhetorical relations of the subordinating kind. Here, the pattern of verb-second placement used in OHG and broadly grammaticalized in OS seems to co-occur with verb-final structures in OE. These differences in the early Germanic situation could be made responsible for the development of different word order patterns in the modern systems of these languages.

The method of analysis pursued in the present study bears implications on the theory of information structure as well. It aims at showing that the identification of the information-structural domains of *Topic* and *Focus* depends not purely on factors associated with the pragmatic features of the discourse referents involved, that is, on properties like *given* or *new*, but also on properties of discourse organization as a whole. Exactly this is the point where discourse structure is supposed to apply. It is claimed that the rhetorical relation of subordination is a pre-condition for the division of *Topic* and *Comment* in an utterance and a condition for filling the position of a sentence topic respectively. By this, clear criteria can be provided whether a discourse-given referent is used as the topic of the sentence or it is part of the focus-domain of a sentence.

## Appendix

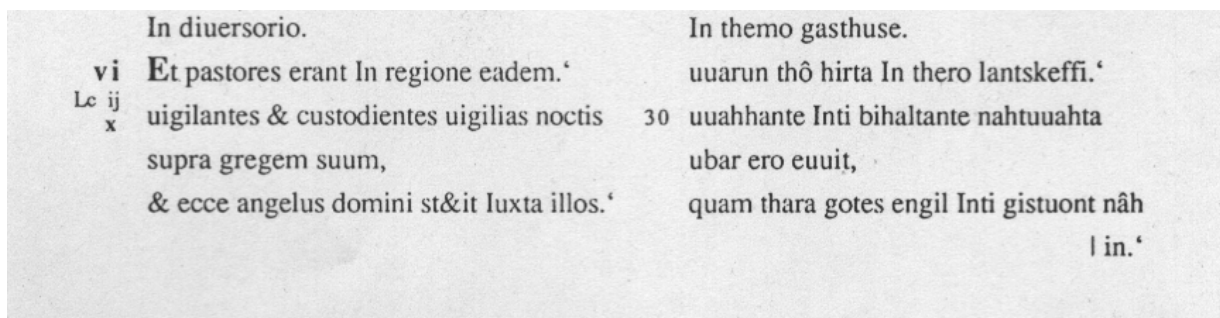
### Picture 1.

The beginning of Luke 2, 8 in the manuscript of the St. Gallen, Stiftsbibl. Cod. 56. Facsimile, pag. 35. In Sonderegger (2003, p. 130).



### Picture 2.

The same part of the text in the edition of Masser (1994, p. 85).



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*Svetlana Petrova*

*Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*

*SFB 632 „Informationsstruktur“, Teilprojekt B4*

*Sitz: Mohrenstrasse 40/41*

*10117 Berlin*

*Germany*

*s.petrova@staff.hu-berlin.de*

*[http://www2.hu-berlin.de/sprachgeschichte/forschung/informationsstruktur/  
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