

The History of Dutch Frame
and Verb Second Sentences*

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0. *The Problem.* As soon as a native speaker of English has acquired enough knowledge of Dutch to form sentences, he or she will soon discover that there are three striking differences between English and Dutch in the position of the verbs.

a) In the surface word order of Dutch main clauses in a complex tense, the verbal elements do not always all show up as one constituent. If constituents other than the subject occur in the sentence, these generally occupy a position in between the finite verb and all other verbal elements:

(1) Het nieuwe kabinet van CDA en D'66 zal volgende week dinsdag zijn regeringsverklaring in de tweede kamer afleggen.[1]

b) In Dutch dependent clauses, all verbal elements generally show up at the end of the clause:

(2) Oud-Minister Den Uyl zei gisteren op de PvdA-familiedag in Tiel dat hij nog niet zeker weet of hij voor de zesde achtereenvolgende keer lijsttrekker van de partij zal worden.

c) Inversion of subject and finite verb is obligatory in Dutch declarative main clauses beginning with any constituent other than the subject:

(3) Waarschijnlijk is geen Nederlandse vrouw over de hele wereld zo bekend als Xaviera Hollander.

The word order phenomena mentioned under *a* and *b* are traditionally regarded as one and the same and are both labeled frame (in Dutch *tang*, in German *Einklammerung* or *Umklammerung* and in recent English publications *embraciation*). The phenomenon under *c* is called *inversion* or *verb second*. In this paper I will use the terms *frame* and *verb second*.

The terms *frame* and *verb second* may for some of you be associated with something unpleasant. For teachers and students of Dutch, these theoretically easy rules are not so easy to put into practice, especially in spoken Dutch. Those among you who have to do simultaneous translations from Dutch into English will dislike the frame above all. Due to the frame, Dutch main clauses in complex tense and all dependent clauses can only be rendered into English after the complete Dutch sentence has been uttered. That can be very troublesome, especially when many elements occur within the frame.

For most people, *frame* and *verb second* may only be annoying rules of Dutch, but they are fascinating for language typologists and for historical linguists. In this paper I will try to introduce you to the fascinating aspects of these two rules by putting them in a typological and historical perspective. Anyone who wants to know more about the teaching aspects of these rules or about the possible exceptions, I refer to Kooij 1973.

1. *Current Dutch word order in typological and historical perspective.* The modern typological approach to word order phenomena dates from 1963. In that year Joseph Greenberg presented the results of an investigation into the relation between different word order phenomena. The most important result of his study was that a relation exists between the relative position of object, subject and verb and the relative order of other elements. Languages in which declarative main clauses generally have the order Verb, Subject, Object, i.e. VSO languages, nearly always have prepositions and the order noun - adjective, while SOV languages, with the order Subject, Object, Verb usually have postpositions and the order adjective - noun. The position of the verb in relation to subject and object turns out to be a good indicator of these and other word order phenomena in a language. Greenberg's investigation revealed that only three different categories are needed to classify the majority of the languages of the world according to their word order: SOV, VSO and SVO, and intermediate form of these two.

Greenberg's article set off an avalanche of investigations into word order, primarily to gain a better insight into the how's and why's of these three word order categories. For this, typical examples of these language categories were studied, such as Japanese and Hindi for SOV, Celtic for VSO and English for SVO. However, languages which cannot easily be classified in one of these three categories were also studied, for the exceptions to a rule are often the key to why it works the way it does.

Of course, you can guess now why Dutch word order is so fascinating. From a Greenbergian typological point of view, Dutch word order is not so easily classified. Although the classification of dependent clauses is rather simple, since they are SOV with the

exception of concessive clauses and some conditional clauses, the situation is more complicated for main clauses. Declarative main clauses in simple tense are SVO, but may also be XVSO, as we have seen in (3). The word order in declarative main clauses in a complex tense is a typological jumble. If we consider the finite verb only, it shows the same characteristics as the finite verb in simple tense, but if we look at the non-finite verb, it also has SOV characteristics. This heterogeneity makes Dutch a fascinating language, not only for syntactic typologists, but also for historical linguists, since heterogeneity in the present may be an indicator of language change. Historical linguists want to know whether this is indeed the case for Dutch and, if so, what the change is: From SOV to SVO/VSO, or the other way around. In the remaining part of this paper I will go into these questions further. First, I will deal with the history of the frame and then with the history of verb second order.

2. *The history of frame and verb second order in Dutch.*

2.1. *The frame.* The term frame is generally used for a sentence with any constituent other than the subject within the frame. From now on, though, I will use the term only for constructions with an object within the frame, so OV and VfoV constructions, because especially these constructions are important in a historical and typological perspective.

According to a theory proposed by Vennemann (1974), all the Germanic languages are involved in a change from OV to VO. English and the Scandinavian languages have already completed this change, while the other Germanic languages, Dutch, German and Frisian, are still changing. According to this theory, the frame, which occurs not only in Dutch, but also in Frisian and German, is considered a remnant of an older stage of the language. The history of the Dutch frame may seem clear now, but that is not the case. In the first place, no reason has yet been discovered for the slow word order development of Dutch, German and Frisian compared to English and the Scandinavian languages. Secondly, the claim that all Germanic languages are developing from OV to VO has only been substantiated for English and it appears not to hold for all the other Germanic languages. Vennemann's article caused a flood of reactions showing that the change from OV to VO did not occur in Frisian and German. On the contrary, it could be clearly demonstrated that those languages had developed in the past five centuries from languages with an occasional frame construction to languages in which the frame always occurs.[2]

I myself have done some research regarding the development of Dutch. I have investigated the occurrence and non-occurrence of the frame quantitatively in a number of Middle Dutch prose-texts. The results are presented in Table I:

Dependent clauses			Main clauses in complex tense		
VO	95	57%	VfVO	63	48%
OV	71	43%	VfOV	67	52%

Table I: Word order in Middle Dutch prose from the dialect of Limburg from c. 1277. *Limburgse leven van Jezus (caput 1-100)*

It is clear that the frame did not always occur in Middle Dutch. It did not show up in about half the sentences in which it could have occurred. An example of a Middle Dutch dependent clause in VO order is given in (4) and one of a main clause in complex tense in VfVO in (5):

(4) dat si souden doeden alle die kinder

(5) du sout ontfaen ene vrocht in dinen lichame

Of course, we cannot be sure whether these results hold for other Middle Dutch dialects. They are in line, though, with the comments on syntax in monographs about Middle Dutch texts from other dialects.

The historical development of the frame appears to differ from what has generally been claimed. The frame in Dutch, Frisian and German cannot be considered a remnant of an older stage of the language, for it occurred far less frequently in older stages. So, instead of wondering why these three languages were so slow in their development from OV to VO, we have to ask why in English and the Scandinavian languages VO has become a rule of grammar, while German, Frisian and Dutch have OV order. It has been suggested that the rise of OV is a result of imitation of Latin patterns. Although this is corroborated by the historical fact that English and Scandinavian were influenced less and at a later date by Latin than the other languages, I doubt whether this is in fact the correct explanation. My main objections have been presented in Gerritsen (1980). Still there must be an internal or external cause to explain the divergence of the various Germanic languages in this respect. In my opinion, an internal cause for the divergence is the fact that the English and Scandinavian verb systems developed differently from the other Germanic languages.

As I have already pointed out, the disappearance of the frame in English took place in a period for which data are available, so it is possible to trace the process and to find the possible motivations for the fade-out of the frame in English. This has been done by Stockwell (1976). The sequence of changes is approximately as (6):

- (6) a. OVfV --> VfOV
 b. VfOV --> VfVO

One of the most important motivations for the change, according to Stockwell, is that single-unit verbs, i.e. single finite verbs without auxiliaries, occur far more frequently than multiple-unit ones in Old English, and that consequently all objects appear after the verb in main clauses. As a result, Old English was reinterpreted as a language without frame.

If we assume that the frequent occurrence of single-unit verbs in Old English is indeed the principal cause for the disappearance of the frame, it may also be assumed that the divergent development of the frame in the Germanic languages is due to the fact that single-unit verbs were not sufficiently present in German, Frisian and Dutch to lead to reinterpretation. In this view, the English and Scandinavian verb systems were more synthetic than the Dutch, German and Frisian ones when the former group of languages entered the "deframing" phase.

I have presented data elsewhere in support of this hypothesis.[2] As far as tense is concerned, it is a well-known fact that the Germanic tense system has developed from synthetic to periphrastic, so from a system in which all tenses could be expressed by a single-unit verb to a system in which for expressing some tenses multiple units were needed. This development is attributed either to direct Romance influence or to a built-in tendency in the language accelerated by Romance influence. Accordingly, the periphrastic tenses established themselves first in West Germanic, in the area where the Romance influence was the greatest, and gradually spread to England and Scandinavia, the area where Romance had little or no influence (Lockwood 1969:75). As a result, the languages which nowadays have a frame developed periphrastic tenses earlier than the languages without frame. Besides, the Scandinavian verb system is also more synthetic than that of the other Germanic languages in two other respects. In the first place because it has a synthetic passive and in the second place since it never has had a periphrastic durative aspect.

I hope to have made it plausible that the frame in Dutch, German and Frisian continues to exist, because the factor that caused its disappearance in English and Scandinavian -- the frequent occurrence of single unit verbs -- was not present in these three languages, since their verb systems developed earlier from synthetic to periphrastic.

2.2. *Verb second order.* Verb second order is a stable and invariable rule in current Standard Dutch, as it is in all the other modern Germanic languages, except English.[2] During a certain period inversion also occurred in English, but it gradually disappeared after the 11th century (Bean 1976). As regards

the history of the other Germanic languages, the development is rather simple: except for Dutch, they all have verb second from the earliest sources on. For Dutch the question is somewhat more complex. In all Middle Dutch grammars we find examples of declarative main clauses beginning with constituents other than the subject, which are not verb second, but what I will call here verb third. Some of the monographs on Middle Dutch syntax do not mention any such sentences, others do. In my own survey I did not find any example in the Limburg texts, but many in the West Flemish texts. All Middle Dutch examples of verb third order happen to be Flemish. Consequently, verb third order cannot be viewed as a feature of Common Middle Dutch, but only of West Flemish. The fact that texts precisely from that dialect area have come down to us from the Middle Ages has led people to believe that verb third order was common in Middle Dutch.

The development of verb second order in the Dutch language area has taken two forms. All dialects, except Flemish, seem to have always been verb second. In Flemish, from the earliest sources on, we find frequent examples of verb third order (De Brabandere 1976, Vanacker 1968). An old Flemish example is given in (7), a current Flemish one in (8).

- (7) Ende in aerlyeder vertrecken zij *beroefden* de boeren
(Weydts chronicle, Brugge 1579)
- (8) In de weerdie van eenigte jaren z' *adden* een hoop geld
verdiend (Kortrijk 1976)

It has been claimed (Stockwell 1976) that the development from verb second to verb third is a natural one. That might be, but the question is why exactly English and Flemish developed so fast. My answer to this question is: close contact with France (French had already become completely verb third in the Middle Ages). Flanders has been extensively exposed to French influence. This also holds for England. During the Norman Conquest (1066-1200) French had a prestigious position in England. We have seen that verb second was precisely disappearing in that period. The question is whether the change from verb second to verb third order in English and Flemish must be ascribed to a direct influence from French or to a kind of creolization process resulting from contact with French, particularly since XSV is also a common feature of creoles. Since no convincing example of borrowing of syntactic patterns (Moravcsik 1978) has ever been presented, I am inclined to believe the latter. It seems all the more likely since at least for English it has been demonstrated that the language has other creole features (Bailey and Maroldt 1977, Domingue 1977).[2] Be this as it may, I hope to have made it plausible that the disappearance of verb second order in English and Flemish has to do with French contact.

3. *Summary.* I have tried to show you which changes took place in Dutch with regard to the frame and verb second order. The frame structure became a rule of grammar and verb second order remained the rule in all dialects except Flemish, in which verb third order occurred from the earliest sources on. I have given a number of possible reasons for the differences in word order between English and Dutch, hoping that such knowledge will lessen the trouble they give you in learning and speaking Dutch. In short, they amount to the following. The frame is due to the fact that the English verb system developed from synthetic to periphrastic at a later date than the Dutch system, while verb second order is due to the simple fact that William the Conqueror decided to cast covetous eyes on England rather than on one of the other Germanic countries.

Notes

*It was made possible for me to attend this conference and present this paper by a grant from the Department of International Relations of the Dutch Ministry of Education. I thank Henriette Schatz for polishing my English.

1. All current Dutch examples are from the newspaper *NRC-Handelsblad* of 1 June 1982.
2. See Gerritsen (1980 and forthcoming) for more details and references.

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