

Topic and Focus in Old French V1 and V2 structures
Marie Labelle (UQAM) et Paul Hirschbühler (Université d'Ottawa)

Problem: Old French (OF) is generally considered a V2 language, traditionally analyzed in the generative approach with the finite V in C and some other phrase in Spec,CP, an analysis derived from that for German and other Germanic languages. Arguing against this analysis, Rinke & Meisel (2009), on the basis of a study of two early 13th c. prose texts, claim that while in 'true' V2 languages, the preverbal constituent may be a Topic, a Focus, or an element that is neither of these, and the postverbal subject a Topic or a Focus depending on the position it occupies, in OF, the preverbal constituent is a Topic or an adverb that links with the preceding discourse, and postverbal subjects are always (part of) the Focus. They propose that OF is not a V2 language and that its preverbal position, like that of contemporary Romance null subject languages (Italian, Spanish or Portuguese), is never a Focus position. However, Zaring (2010) and Marchello-Nizia (1999) show that the discursive function of preverbal objects changed between 1100 and the 13th c. In 1100, preverbal objects could be Focus elements; according to them, this is no longer the case for 13th c. texts, where they were always Topics, strongly linked to the preceding discourse.

Aim of the presentation: In this talk we provide arguments in favor of the traditional V2 approach to OF by showing 1) that postverbal subjects may be sentence Topics, and 2) that preverbal constituents may be Focus elements. In addition, we document the evolution in the distribution of preverbal constituents and postverbal subjects between 980 and 1309. We consider as Focus the portion of a sentence providing relationally new information and as Topic/Theme the ground, the portion of the sentence on which some new information is predicated; the Topic/Theme is typically a referentially given referent: definite, specific, accessible.

We analyzed the declarative matrix clauses in 19 parsed texts dated between 980 and 1309 (7 in verse, 12 in prose – MCVF corpus & Penn supplement).

We first show that the vast majority of postverbal DP subjects in V1 sentences are referentially definite, specific and discursively accessible. These are not limited to sentences expressing a change of speaker (the majority), they also contain sentences where the post-verbal subject is undeniably the sentence Topic (1). Then we turn to strictly V2 sentences (leaving out V3+ clauses, which we consider as V2 with extra material to the left). **Figure 1** shows that, in V2 sentences, preverbal subjects do not form the majority of examples until 1226. Importantly, the "other" preverbal constituents (which amount to about 30% in verse texts until 1180) include adjectives (2a), quantifiers (2b), participles (2c), predicative NP's (2d), which are the Focus of the clause rather than the Topic, as well as objects (3). In OVS sentences, 30% of preverbal objects are nonspecific indefinites, both in verse (33%) and in prose (30%). Preverbal definite objects are not always sentence Topics. **Figure 2** shows that until about 1200, in the majority of OVS sentences with a full DP subject, the preverbal O is the Focus, and the postverbal S is the sentence Topic (see (3)). From the end of the first quarter of the 13th c. on, this construction forms a minority of OVS examples. However preverbal Focus objects are still attested (4).

Conclusion: The data show that preverbal Focus constituents and postverbal Topic subjects are frequent in OF until about 1225. The oldest period is discursively similar to Germanic V2 languages; the beginning of the 13th c. is a transition period with a regression of the variety of constituents introducing V2 sentences, and of initial Focus elements; after 1225 there is a dominance of preverbal Topic subjects but preverbal Focus constituents are still attested. Thus, contrary to some recent claims, OF is a V2 language, particularly in the oldest period. During the 13th c., clause-initial Topics become more and more prevalent.

- (1) ‘Rei nus dune [...].’ Desplut mult ceste parole á Samuel (1170 QLR1-1, 499).
 “‘King us give [...]’”. Displeased much these words to Samuel’
- (2) a. Tut sul s’en est Eufemien tournét (1050-Saint-Alexis,69.630)
 ‘All alone has Eufemien returned’
- b. Et que valoit tes bués? -Sire, vint sous m’en demande on (1200-Aucassin XXIV, 68-69)
 ‘And what is worth your ox? – Sire, 20 cents me asks one.’ (‘I am asked 20 cents’)
- c. Trenchet li ad li quens le destre poign, (1100 Roland,142.1926)
 cut him has the count the right hand (‘The count cut his right hand’)
- d. Beaus chevaliers e bons esteit (1180 Marie de France,61.1250)
 ‘Beautiful knight and good was’ (‘He was a beautiful and good knight’)
- (3) La main destre leva adonques la dame, (1177 Yvain,202.7065)
 ‘The hand right raised then the lady’
- (4) a. Moult grant doumage fist a nostre gent, (1309-Joinville,259.3009)
 ‘Much great damage caused to our people’
- b. La maniere comment il pristrent la cité de Baudas et le calife nous conterent les marcheans;
 ‘The manner how they took the city of Baudas and the calife us told the merchants’
 (1309 Joinville,289.3370)

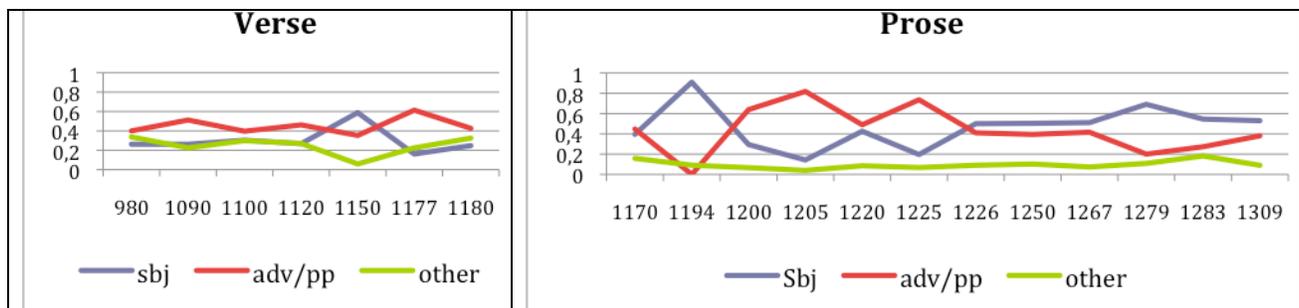


Figure 1 – V2 sentences – Proportions of preverbal constituents

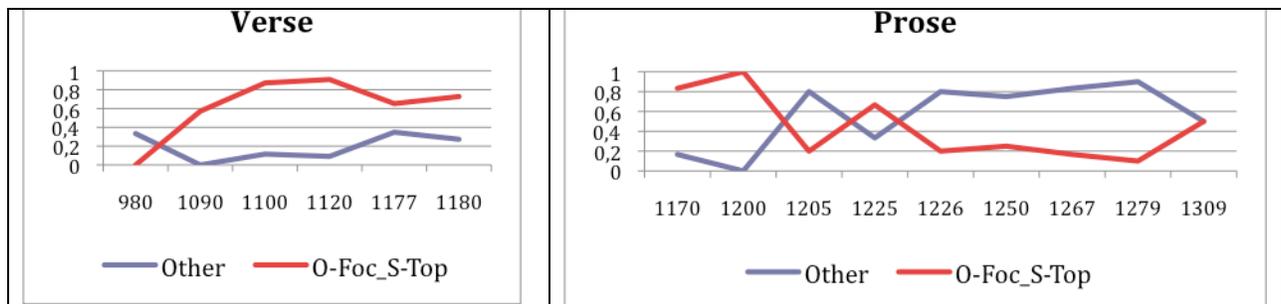


Figure 2 – OVS sentences – Proportion of sentences with O=Foc, S=Top

References

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