

# Sentence Beginnings in Present-Day English, Present-Day Dutch and Old English\*

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The main typological difference between Present-Day English on the one hand and Present-Day Dutch and Old English on the other is that the former is an SVO language and the latter two are both verb-second languages. Some synchronic studies of Dutch and English have connected this syntactic difference with differences these languages display in what is allowed as a subject and as a non-subject clause-initial constituent. The aim of the corpus-based pilot study presented in this paper is twofold: (i) to verify whether these differences are really due to the verb-second syntax by looking at a third language that is also verb-second: Old English; (ii) to establish how the differences in preferences are reflected in a corpus.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known fact that Present-Day Dutch allows fronting of objects to a clause-initial position in the main clause to a greater extent than Present-Day English. This has often been ascribed to the most notable syntactic difference that exists between the two languages: Dutch is an OV-language with verb-second in the main clause, whereas English is SVO. However, it is not only objects that can be fronted in Present-Day Dutch. The clause-initial position in Present-Day Dutch is in fact a multifunctional position. This multifunctionality is connected with the verb-second rule, which entails that the finite verb has to be in second position, but not that the subject has to be in first. Examples (1) through (3)<sup>1</sup> show the variety of clause-initial elements in Present-Day Dutch:

- (1) *Met genoegen kunnen we u meedelen dat uw aanvraag gehonoreerd is.*  
**With pleasure** can we you inform that your application honoured is.  
'It is with pleasure that we can inform you that your application has been honoured.'  
(Los 2009)
  
- (2) *Op de Noordpool is het misschien te koud, maar op Kreta sterf ik van de hitte.*  
**On the North Pole** is it perhaps too cold, but **on Crete** die I of the heat.  
'It is perhaps too cold at the North Pole, but I will die of the heat on Crete.'  
Or (more colloquially): 'The North Pole is perhaps too cold, but Crete I find far too hot.'

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<sup>1</sup> Unless a source is given, the examples in this paper are our own, based on our knowledge of Dutch and English.

- (3) **Dat** is onze oom. **Hij** nam ons altijd mee naar de boerderij.  
**That** is our uncle. **He** took us always with to the farm.  
 ‘That is our uncle. He always took us with him to the farm’

The first constituent can be discourse-new, such as the PP *met genoeg* in Example (1), but it can also be contrastive, such as the PPs *op de Noordpool* and *op Kreta* in Example (2), or discourse-old — or given — such as the demonstrative *dat* and the personal pronoun *hij* in Example (3). Moreover, non-subjects as well as subjects occur freely in clause-initial position. The English translations of these Dutch examples show that given information (as in Example (3)) can easily occur clause-initially in Dutch as well as in English, and that contrastive information (as in Example (2)) can, albeit somewhat less easily, be translated into English without having to abandon clause-initial position. Neutral non-subjects (as in Example (1)), on the other hand, are not able to take up clause-initial position in English, whereas their Dutch counterparts do.

However, this restriction concerning the clause-initial element has not always been present in English. Old English — the language spoken in England roughly from the fifth century through the mid-twelfth century — resembles Present-Day Dutch more than it resembles Present-Day English in terms of word order, and therefore displays a range of options for the pre-subject position that is not unlike the range of options that exists in Present-Day Dutch. Most notably, Old English is able to start a sentence more or less neutrally with a non-subject, as in Examples (4) and (5):

- (4) **Him** geaf ða se cyngc twa hund gildenra pænega.  
**Him** gave then the king two hundred golden pennies.  
 ‘The king then gave him two hundred golden pennies.’ (coapollo,ApT: 51.20.576)<sup>2</sup>
- (5) **Be þære** he gestrynde ðry suna Her & Onam & Sela.  
**By that** he begot three sons Er & Onan & Shelah.  
 ‘He had three sons with her: Er, Onan and Shelah.’ (cogenesiC,Gen\_[Ker]: 38.3.83)

These non-subject clause-initial elements — which will be referred to as first constituents throughout the rest of this paper — in Old English and Present-Day Dutch are often adverbial discourse linkers which connect the sentence they appear in to the preceding discourse, as indeed is the case for the clause-initial PP *be þære* (‘by that one’) in Example (5). This similarity between Old English and Present-Day Dutch may very well be due to the fact that they have the verb-second rule in common, which does not only have syntactic consequences, but also, as we will see, information structural. Two rules for movement — one dictating that the verb should move to second position and the other allowing any sentence element to be fronted — yield verb-second word order in the main clause (Los 2009). The syntactic shift that the loss of verb-second during the late Middle English and early Modern English periods entailed may then have had influence on — or may even have been influenced by — the shift in options for the first constituent. Based on the synchronic differences between Present-Day English and Present-Day Dutch, and the similarities between Old English and Present-Day Dutch, we expect that the diachronic differences between Old English and Present-Day English concerning the first constituent and the subject show a similar development: that from a versatile first constituent to a less versatile first constituent.

Section 2 will look in more detail at the verb-second constraint and its relation with information structure, which connects Old English and Present-Day Dutch. Section 3 will look at the differences in preferences for sentence beginnings between Present-Day Dutch and

<sup>2</sup> All Old English examples are taken from the York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose (YCOE).

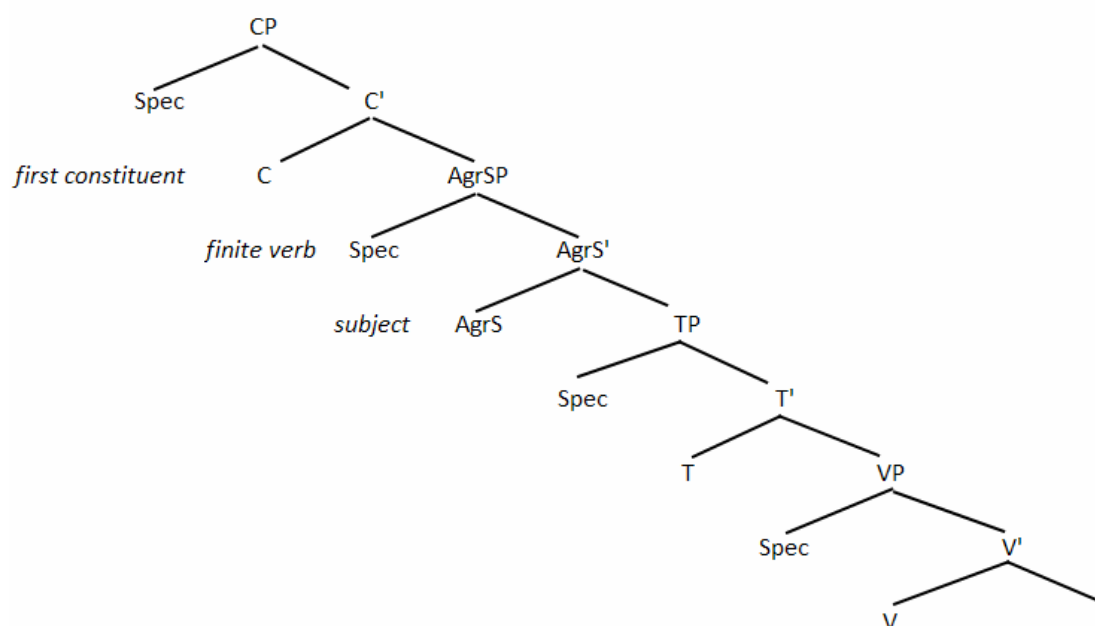
Present-Day English, with special attention to the subject in the three languages. Section 4 will contain the results of a corpus-based pilot study which aims to establish whether the differences between Old English and Present-Day English are indeed similar to those between Present-Day Dutch and Present-Day English and can therefore perhaps be connected to the loss of the verb-second constraint in English. Finally, a conclusion will be presented in Section 5.

## 2. SYNTAX AND INFORMATION STRUCTURE IN PRESENT-DAY DUTCH AND OLD ENGLISH

The last few years have witnessed a new perspective on the verb-second constraint, which has for a long time been considered a purely syntactic phenomenon. This new approach is based on the information structural notions of given and new, focus and background, topic and comment, or theme and rheme, which were introduced in a basic form under the term Functional Sentence Perspective by the Prague School in the 1970s (e.g. Daneš 1974). The main idea of given and new information (whether it be discourse-old or new or hearer-old or new) is that a universal preference exists for a particular information ordering, namely that of given before new. This preferred order of information dictates the sentence position of elements with a certain information structural status — i.e. given or new — and therefore interacts with the syntax of a sentence, and although it has for a long time been considered not to be part of syntax proper, recent generative analyses of language variation and change in general and verb-second in particular tend to incorporate information structural notions.

Following studies on verb-second that combine syntax and information structure, such as Van Kemenade & Westergaard (forthcoming), Hinterhölzl & Petrova (2010) and Los (2009), we assume that there is an interface between verb-second and information structure. We assume the standard analysis of verb-second clauses, first proposed by Koster (1975) and later modified by Vikner (1995), in which the first constituent occurs in SpecCP, the finite verb moves to C, and subjects occur in SpecAgrSP.

(Figure 1)

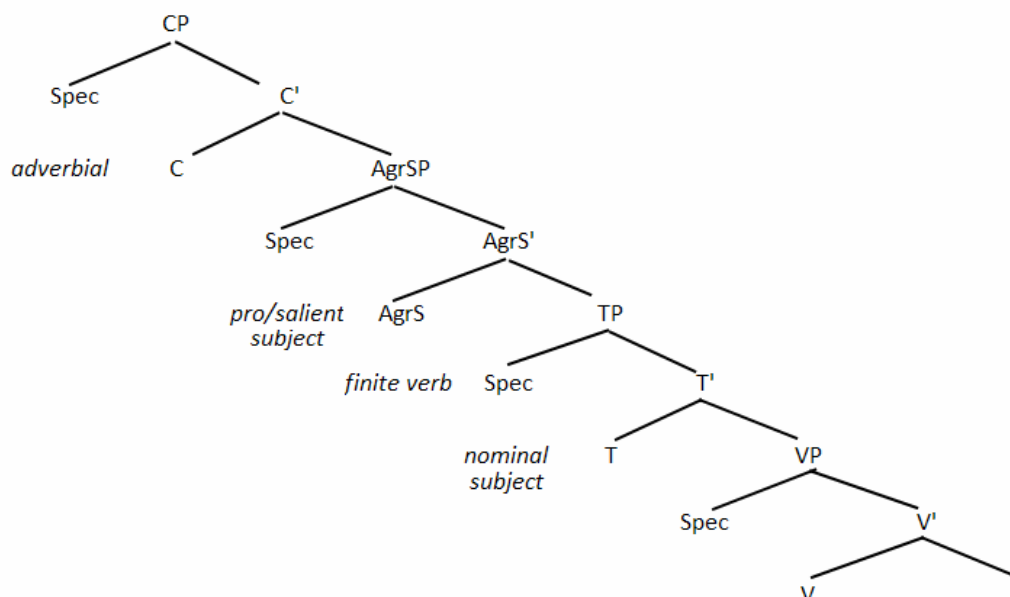


Present-Day Dutch belongs to the category which Biberauer (2002) dubs ‘well behaved’ verb-second languages; that is: languages in which the finite verb always occurs in second — i.e.

never in third — position in the main clause, but never in the subclause, provided that the subclause is headed by an overt complementiser (cf. Zwart 1997).

It is important to note, however, that Old English had its own version of verb-second, which distinguished between a pre- and a post-verbal subject position, as first demonstrated by Van Kemenade (1987) and later formalised by Pintzuk (1999), Haeberli (2002) and Van Kemenade & Westergaard (forthcoming). The structure given in Figure 1, with the subject postverbally in SpecAgrSP, occurs when the first constituent is an operator, a negative such as *ne* or *na*, or a discourse adverb such as *þa* or *þonne*. When the first constituent is an adverbial, however, the verb only moves as far as the head AgrS, and the subject occurs either in SpecAgrSP as before, but now crucially preverbally; or the subject occurs postverbally in SpecTP. This distinction is ruled by the information structural status of the subject (as demonstrated by Van Kemenade, Milicev and Baayen 2008): non-salient nominal subjects occur in the lower position, while pronominal and salient nominal subjects occur in the higher position, giving rise not to a verb-second but to a verb-third environment. The tree structure in Figure 2 illustrates the two subject positions with the verb in AgrS:

(Figure 2)



Examples (6) and (7) show the difference in subject position between given and non-given subjects.

- (6) *Æfter þysum dædum hi þancodon Drihtne.*  
 After these deeds they thanked Lord.  
 ‘After these deeds, they thanked the Lord.’ (coelive,ÆLS\_[Maccabees]:504.5170)
- (7) *On þam ylcan timan com eac sum bisceop fram Rome byrig.*  
 In that same time came also some bishop from Rome city.  
 ‘Around the same time, a bishop from Rome also came.’ (coelive,ÆLS\_[Oswald]:119.5450)

Both sentences have an adverbial in first position, with Example (6) showing the given pronominal subject *hi* occurring preverbally, whereas Example (7) has the verb in second position, followed by the new nominal subject *sum bisceop*.

Following Los (2009), we take the most important consequence of having a verb-second system to be the availability of two positions for given material in the left periphery: the presubject first position, where adverbials and other non-subject discourse linkers such as

the PP in Example (5) can be found, and the subject position itself, which is either pre- or postverbal, and generally hosts the protagonist or the aboutness topic. Present-Day English, on the other hand, still has a pre-subject position available, which makes the Present-Day English translation of Example (7) possible. However, it is not only the syntactic status of this position that is different — it possibly has an extra-clausal status — but also the differences in use, which we claim are due to information structural restrictions. The loss of verb-second in English, then, is more than a purely syntactic ‘falling off of frequencies’ and ‘entailed the loss of this special position’ (Los 2009: 104). Section 3 illustrates how it is not just the first constituent that is affected by the changes in the left periphery. Rather, the changing use of this first position had consequences for the use of the subject.

### 3. PREFERENCES FOR SENTENCE BEGINNINGS IN PRESENT-DAY DUTCH AND PRESENT-DAY ENGLISH

The non-subject clause-initial constituent is used relatively infrequently in Present-Day English, and when it is used, it is marked and closely associated with contrast, as in the colloquial English translation of Example (2). Likewise, Examples (8)(a) and (9)(a) are far less likely to occur than their Present-Day Dutch counterparts in (b); Dutch learners of English are in fact warned against using them.

- (8) a. *With these words he said goodbye.*  
 b. *Met deze woorden nam hij afscheid.*
- (9) a. *In the latest Beowulf movie we witness what happens to Beowulf after Grendel dies.*  
 b. *In de laatste Beowulf film zien we wat er met Beowulf gebeurt nadat Grendel sterft.*

We claimed in Section 1 that the difference between Present-Day English and Present-Day Dutch illustrated by Examples (8) and (9) has to do with the fact that verb-second languages such as Dutch have the propensity to employ the first constituent — which obviously occurs in the preverbal domain, and is therefore, as is suggested in Section 2, associated with givenness — as a link to the *immediately* preceding discourse. This linking of an utterance to the immediately preceding discourse by means of the first constituent — most notably in the form of an adverbial phrase which often also contains a demonstrative or possessive pronoun — is termed local anchoring by Los & Dreschler (forthcoming), who claim that the possibility for local anchoring disappeared from the English language along with verb-second.

As subject prominence is a crucial difference between Present-Day English as an SVO language and Present-Day Dutch as a verb-second language, a picture of sentence beginnings cannot be painted without involving the subject. As Los & Dreschler point out, the subject in a verb-second language is more stable than the subject in an SVO language such as Present-Day English; verb-second subjects are usually reserved for the protagonist of the discourse, which would entail frequent occurrence of personal pronouns as the subject or ellipsis of the subject. This is indeed what Los & Dreschler find for Old English. Present-Day English subjects, on the other hand, are much more variable throughout the discourse, and can express the protagonist or any other discourse entity. This freedom in subject choice is clearly visible in Present-Day English. Where in Present-Day Dutch a locally anchoring first constituent in the form of a PP would occur, Present-Day English uses subjects that would never occur in Dutch. Examples (10) through (12) show subjects that are typical for Present-Day English in (a), and their infrequently used or even downright ungrammatical Present-Day Dutch counterparts in (b):

- (10) a. *This advertisement will sell us a lot.*  
 b. *\*Deze advertentie zal (ons) veel verkopen.*

- (11) a. *The latest edition of the book has dropped a chapter.*  
b. *\*De laatste editie van het boek heeft een hoofdstuk laten vallen.*
- (12) a. *The last few years have witnessed a new perspective on the verb-second constraint.*  
b. *?De afgelopen jaren zagen (de opkomst van) een nieuw perspectief op de verb-second regel.*

Present-Day Dutch resists the use of subjects as the ones in the examples above; psycholinguistic research has shown that speakers of verb-second languages such as Present-Day Dutch resist the use of inanimate, non-agentive subjects, whereas these kinds of subjects are no problem at all for speakers of Present-Day English (e.g. Carroll & Lambert 2003).

Two aspects, then, can be distinguished concerning the differences in sentence beginnings between Present-Day English on the one hand and Present-Day Dutch and Old English on the other hand; the first one has to do with the versatility of the subject, and the second one, which is perhaps more noticeable, has to do with the first constituent and its function as a so-called local anchor. The pilot study presented in Section 4 will focus on the second aspect; that of the first constituent.

#### 4. CORPUS-BASED PILOT STUDY

##### 4.1. Hypotheses

Considering the similarities between Old English and Present-Day Dutch, we expect that the differences between Old English and Present-Day English resemble those between Present-Day Dutch and Present-Day English, and hypothesise that verb-second is a key factor in this. More precisely, we expect that the role of the subject and first constituent changed in such a way that the first constituent moved from a position for creating unmarked discourse links to a situation in Present-Day English where its use is very much restricted; and we hypothesise that the subject went from only an expresser of the protagonist to a multifunctional position, expressing both the protagonist, as well as any other actors, and, most crucially, it took over the function of creating unmarked discourse links from the first constituent. Consequently, the number of first constituents diminished, whereas the number of subjects in first position increased. This theory translates into two concrete hypotheses. They are:

- (1) Old English and Present-Day Dutch will display a lower percentage of subject-initial clauses, because the first position will often be filled by a first constituent.
- (2) Old English and Present-Day Dutch will display a wider range of options for the first constituent, reflecting the versatility of this first position.

##### 4.2. Corpus

The corpus used for this pilot study consisted of a selection of main clauses from three Old English texts (the tenth-century *Story of Cædmon*, the eleventh-century *Life of St Æthelthryth* and the twelfth-century *Seinte Marherete, the Meiden ant Martyr in Old English*), two Present-Day Dutch texts (*Politicus uit Hartstocht: Biografie van Pieter Jelles Troelstra* from 2010 and *Vestdijk, een biografie* from 2005) and two Present-Day English texts (*Elizabeth Gaskell* from 1995 and *Jacques Derrida: A Biography* from 2006). Saints' lives were chosen for two reasons: they constitute a well-attested genre in the surviving corpus of Old English and they are coherent stories that would lend themselves well for local anchoring. Biographies were chosen as a modern genre because they seemed to be closest to saints' lives in terms of

content and style. Table 1 contains an overview of the number of main clauses selected for each language:

(Table 1) *Number of main clauses selected for each language*

	<b>OLD ENGLISH</b>	<b>PRESENT-DAY DUTCH</b>	<b>PRESENT-DAY ENGLISH</b>
No. of main clauses	247	173	151

Two sections containing a short narrative, of two different chapters in each Present-Day Dutch and Present-Day English biography were selected. The same selection method was applied to the Old English text *Seinte Marherete*. The other two Old English saints' lives — *Cædmon* and *Æthelthryth* — were selected in their entirety because of their limited length. The three Old English texts each stem from a different century so as to ensure representativeness, which explains the higher number of clauses for OE.

### 4.3. Results

As for the use of the first constituent, as reflected in the number of subject-initial clauses, Present-Day Dutch and Old English behave differently from Present-Day English, as shown in Table 2:

(Table 2) *Frequencies and percentages of clause-initial elements for each language*

	<b>PRESENT-DAY ENGLISH</b>	<b>PRESENT-DAY DUTCH</b>	<b>OLD ENGLISH</b>
Subject	77% (117)	54% (94)	61% (150)
First constituent	23% (34)	46% (79)	39% (79)
Total	100% (151)	100% (173)	100% (247)

Just over three quarters of the selected clauses in Present-Day English are subject-initial, whereas that percentage is much lower in Present-Day Dutch, which has only just over half of the clauses starting with a subject. Old English has a lower percentage than Present-Day English - a difference of 16% - but the percentage of subject-initial clauses is still higher than in Present-Day Dutch, with 7%. Nevertheless, the results for the clause-initial elements are statistically significant on a  $p < .05$  level. This supports the findings of Los & Dreschler (forthcoming), but it also suggests that although Dutch and Old English are closer, they are not completely similar.

Table 3 shows the largest categories of first constituents in Present-Day English:

(Table 3) *Frequencies of first constituent categories in Present-Day English*

Time adverbial	13
Non-finite clause	8
Clause	4
Place adverbial	4
Other	5
<b>Total number of first constituents</b>	<b>34</b>

Time adverbials are most frequent in the Present-Day English texts, with clauses (both non-finite and finite) following. Example (13)(a) shows one of the few instances in which there is some kind of link in a remnant verb-second environment. Example (13)(b) shows how, in some cases, it is possible to have a discourse link in the first position, with *these experiences* linking back to the previous sentence.

- (13) a. *The theme of conflicting senses of identity is prominent in her fiction. So, too, is her manipulation of the tension which arises when individuals are subjected to rival demands.*  
 b. *After these experiences, schools and colleges always gave him an unpleasant feeling.*

These examples, however, are exceptional in the corpus.

Present-Day Dutch shows a rather different ranking when it comes to the most common types of first constituents. As Table 4 shows, the largest category is that of fronted elements:

(Table 4) *Frequencies of first constituents in Present-Day Dutch*

Fronted element (argument/adjunct)	22
Time adverbial	19
Place adverbial	13
'd-word'	7
Other	18
<b>Total number of first constituents</b>	<b>79</b>

The examples show that almost anything can be fronted, whether it is an argument, and adjunct, discourse-new or discourse-old, as witnessed by the clause-initial heavy object in Example (14)(a) and the clause-initial PP in example (14)(b):

- (14) a. *Wat hij als 'uitzonderlijk' zag of beleefde noteerde Vestdijk in zijn aantekeningenschriftjes.*  
 What he as 'exceptional' saw or experienced wrote down Vestdijk in his notebooks.  
 'Vestdijk wrote down in his notebooks what he saw or experienced as "exceptional".'  
 b. *Aan het proefschrift waren twintig stellingen toegevoegd.*  
 To the dissertation were twenty statements added.  
 'Twenty statements were added to the dissertation.'

Another remarkable category, and one which was not found in the Present-Day English corpus, is that of d-words, or discourse-words. These pronominal adverbs, of which *daarmee* in Example (15) is an example, occur in first position and directly link to the previous discourse. They are the most overt type of local anchors.

- (15) *Daarmee wordt de buitenstaander deelgenoot en medeverantwoordelijk voor het lot van de ander(en).*  
 With that the outsider becomes part of and partly responsible for the fate of the other(s).  
 'This causes the outsider to be part of and partly responsible for the fate of the other(s).'

As in Present-Day English, time and place adverbials are quite common in Present-Day Dutch first position as well.

The data for Old English show a different picture altogether, as shown in Table 5:

(Table 5) *Frequencies of first constituents in Old English*

Time adverbial	44
'd-word'	17
Verb	16
Place adverbial	7
Fronted element (argument/adjunct)	4
Other	7
<b>Total number of non-subject initials</b>	<b>95</b>

Time adverbials are the most common elements in first position. Like Present-Day Dutch, Old English has a rather large category of d-words. It also has a number of sentences with fronted elements, as in Example (16)(a), although this number is much smaller than in Present-Day Dutch. A special category is the verb-first sentences, which do not occur in either PDE or PDD, as in (16)(b).

- (16) a. *Be hire is awryten þæt heo wel drohtnode to anum mæle fæstende.*  
 About her is written that she well lived to one meal fasting  
 'It is written (about her) that she lived comfortably on one meal fasting'
- b. *Wæs eac wundorlic þæt seo ðruh wæs geworht þurh Godes foresceawunge hire swa gemæte.*  
 Was also miraculous that the coffin was made through God's providence her so suitably  
 'It was also miraculous that the coffin was made so suitable for her through God's providence'

As Calle-Martín and Miranda-García point out, these verb-first main clauses occur quite frequently in Old English, but they are also heavily dependent on authorial preference. Moreover, the frequencies of verb-first clauses decline when verb-second becomes more stable in the late Old English period. Verb-first was in all likelihood a stylistic device that was freely employed by some authors, but not by all. Finally, like in Present-Day English and Present-Day Dutch, place adverbials form a large category.

In summary, Old English is closer to Present-Day Dutch than it is to Present-Day English when it comes to the number of subject-initial clauses. Present-Day English main clauses often start with a non-finite clause; a phenomenon that is far less common in both Present-Day Dutch and Old English. On the other hand, Old English and Present-Day Dutch frequently use fronted elements and d-words, which in turn is uncommon in Present-Day Dutch. Two categories seemed frequent, and thus stable in all three languages, namely place and — especially — time adverbials. This may seem surprising because of the restrictions on the Present-Day English non-subject clause-initial constituent, but it is not: time adverbials such as *then* are perfectly acceptable as a clause-initial element in Present-Day English, even if it is not used as frequently as in verb-second languages. The difference between clause-initial *then* in Present-Day English and clause-initial *then* in verb-second languages lies in the point of reference of the temporal adverbial — i.e. whether the event that precedes *then* is completed or not (Carroll & Lambert 2005). All in all, it is clear that Old English behaves different from Present-Day English, but we cannot say that it is entirely similar to Present-Day Dutch. Further research should point out whether this is due to the differences in verb-second between Present-Day Dutch and Old English.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Verb-second languages such as Present-Day Dutch and Old English and SVO languages such as Present-Day English do not only differ from a syntactic viewpoint; although it is a well-known fact that verb-second syntax allows free use of non-subject clause-initial elements, it is not only the possible occurrence of these elements, but also their nature that makes them interesting. The first constituent in verb-second languages is the domain *par excellence* for given information, and it is used as a local anchor, referring back to the immediately preceding discourse. It seems, then, that verb-second is not only a grammatical phenomenon, but it has broader consequences for organising the discourse.

The results of the pilot study presented in this paper show that there are certain similarities between the three languages. The most notable similarity is the occurrence of clause-initial temporal adverbials, which is — as we explained in Section 4 — not surprising. However, the majority of the data indicates that Old English and Present-Day Dutch group together in their use of the first constituent: they use the first constituent more often than Present-Day English does, and they use a comparable range of elements as first constituents. D(iscourse)-words — the first constituents that are most suitable as local anchors — occur in Present-Day Dutch and Old English, but not in Present-Day English. This indicates that local anchoring is indeed typical of verb-second languages.

Nevertheless, Old English and Present-Day Dutch are not completely similar: aside from the rather frequent occurrence of verb-initial main clauses in Old English and the absence of these verb-initial clauses in Present-Day Dutch, Old English employs significantly more time adverbials and d-words and significantly fewer fronted elements and place adverbials than Present-Day Dutch does. It is at this point unclear whether these differences can be attributed to the fact that Old English has another version of verb-second than Present-Day Dutch does, seeing as the difference between these versions of verb-second mostly revolves around the possibility of the occurrence of verb-third in Old English, which does not exist in Present-Day Dutch. A closer examination of Old English data on a larger scale might lead to a better understanding of these differences.

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