Mörgen, wi kommen weer: Verb Placement Variation in Heritage Speakers of Low German

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Introduction

Iowa is home to the largest remaining group of East Frisian Low German (LG) heritage speakers. Although the original settlement was established in the 1850s, the language was maintained until the 21st century. Nowadays, the remaining 50 elderly speakers have shifted to English in most domains and usage of LG varies greatly. This pilot study of four speakers shows that verb placement in main clauses still robustly shows V2-structures. However, in 16 out of 173 cases, V3-structures can be attested. A logistic regression model shows that the occurrence of V3-sentences is favored with clause initial temporal adverbials, plural person, prosodic exposition of preverbal material, and no previous subject mention. Because this structure is highly predictable by linguistic factors, the findings provide further evidence that V3-structures are a syntactic option in some Germanic contact varieties that may be used for specific information-structural purposes.

V3-Structures in Contact Varieties

- Speakers of Germanic contact- or heritage varieties may show variation in verb placement in main clauses (e.g. Sewell 2015, Wiese et al. 2017, Pecht 2019).
- In main clauses, cases of verb third (V3) placement may be found, instead of the canonical verb second (V2) structures.
- V3-structures typically occur after temporal adverbials and (pronominal) subjects.
- Similar structures have been found for contact varieties of German, Dutch, Swedish and Norwegian (all of them are V2-languages)

- Similarly, Low German (LG) shows asymmetric word order, with verb-final position in subordinate clauses and V2 in main clauses (Langer 2003: 284)
- V3 patterns have been reported in passing for heritage speakers of LG in the USA (e.g., Bender 1980, Wirrer 2009), such as (1):

(1) *Denn   he   verkoopt   de.*
    then   he   sell-PRES   it
    'Then he sells it.'
                         (adapted from Bender 1980: 83)

- Distribution of V3-structures in LG heritage speakers has not been studied yet
- A variationist study that takes the role of prosody into account may inform our understanding of grammatical developments in heritage communities

The Role of Prosody

- Standard measurement for spoken language: *intonation units* (IUs) (Croft 1995).
- Intonation is used to divide speech stream into chunks, signal sentence mode, and highlight information (O'Brien 2020: 167).
- IUs can also be conceptualized as "discrete segment[s] of information" (Chafe 1994: 53).
- Larger cognitive units are expressed in "super-intonation units" (Chafe 1994: 140), so-called a "prosodic sentences" (Chafe 1994: 142).
- IUs may end in slightly raised or level intonation, indicating the continuation of the utterance
- Speakers indicate that they have expressed the entire idea by using intonation that marks the end of the utterance (i.e., sharply falling in declarative statements and sharply rising in requests).
- A prosodic sentence may comprise a single IU or consist of two or multiple IUs.
- If V3 structures may occur within a single IU or distributed across two or more IUs within one prosodic sentence, which may indicate different discourse-pragmatic purposes (Selting & Kern 2009: 2502).

Research Questions

1. Do LG heritage speakers show variation in verb placement in main clauses?

Hypothesis: Based on previous studies, some cases of V3-structures in main clauses are expected, but V2 will be the dominant structure.

2. What are the linguistic factors that condition V3?

Hypothesis: V3 may be favored after clause initial temporal adverbials. Prosody may play a role, indicating discourse pragmatic differences in verb placement.

3. What can these findings contribute to the ongoing discussion regarding the occurrence of V3-structures?

Hypothesis: Some researchers have attributed the use of V3-structures to interferences from the dominant language (Alexiadou & Lohndal 2018, Sewell 2015), or to individual attrition (Bender 1980, Wirrer 2009). Wiese et al. (2017) propose that V3-structures are a syntactic option that may be used for discourse-pragmatic purposes, to allow the introduction of the discursive frame and topic of the sentence early in the clause. In this case, the occurrence of V3 would be predictable by linguistic factors.

Speech Community and Participants

- Community originates in East Frisia in modern-day Northern Germany
- In the mid 19th century, many East Frisians migrated to the Midwestern states in the USA
- Initially maintained the traditional LG-High German diglossia
- By the early 1940s, churches had completely shifted to English
- LG was still maintained in the spoken domain
- Today, ca. 50 LG heritage speakers still live in the area (70-95 years old)

- 4 participants; names are pseudonyms and represent only the gender
- First language: LG; Second language: English (age 5)
- None of the participants had heritage HG proficiency or was literate in LG.

	Affiliation with heritage society	No affiliation with heritage society
Regular use of LG	Lisa (82 years)	Arthur (78 years)
Rare use of LG	Daniel (91 years)	Derek (86 years)

Participants by affiliation with heritage society and self-reported use of LG

Procedure

- Questions in LG on memories about childhood, farming, holidays and school (interviews in November 2018 and May 2019)
- LG conversations were manually transcribed with the use of ELan, indicating IUs and prosodic sentences, then saved as txt.files
- The first (up to) 50 consecutive main clauses including a finite verb were extracted (total n=173 clauses).
- The outcome variable was defined as "canonical" (V1 and V2) vs. "non-canonical" (V3)
- Seven factor groups were coded for: singular vs. plural; past vs. present; complex verb phrases vs. simple verb phrases; clause initial adjunct vs. clause-initial arguments and verb; previous subject mention by same speaker or other speaker/none; same subject or switch reference; preverbal material in the same or separate IU.
- A logistic regression model was built in R (R Core team) to describe the linguistic factors that condition the use of V3-structures

Findings: Variation in Verb Placement

- Overall, V3 placement is clearly disfavored in the data set (16 out of 173 tokens; 9%)
- Four predictors were selected as significant (in this order): clause initial adjunct, person/number, prosodic integration, and previous subject mention.

1. Clause initial adjunct (p-value = .0003)
- V3 is strongly favored with a clause initial adjunct
- 35 tokens have a "clause initial adjunct", out of which 11 tokens or 31% show V3-structures:

(2) *un   dann   de kinner   mu- mutten   finnen,* | and then the children must-PAST find-INF
    'And then the children had to find [them].' (Derek)

- Clause initial adjuncts in V3-sentences include: *(un) dann* (7x), *un doar, mörgen, meiste, erste, nineteen-thirtynine,* ("and then, and then, tomorrow, mostly, first") → temporal adverbs
- Other V3 cases show Object-Subject-Verb (3x) SubordinateClause-Subject-Verb (1x), or Subject-Adverb-Verb structures (1x)

2. Person/Number (p-value = .022)
- V3 is favored with Plural person
- 71 tokens show plural person (41%), out of which 12 appear in V3-structures (17%)
- V3-structures by person:
  - Singular: 1st (1/32); 2nd (0/14); 3rd (3/58)
  - Plural: 1st (8/36); 2nd (0/2); 3rd (4/23)
- Or, differently put, 50% of all V3-clauses occur as 3rd Plural and 25% occur as 1st Plural

3. Prosodic integration (p-value = .0285)
- V3 is favored when preverbal material belonging to the same clause occurs in a different IU as compared to the finite verb:

(3) a   *un   dann,* | and then
   b   *wi   mussen   antrecken.* | we must-PAST dress-INF
   'And then we had to get dressed' (Lisa)

(4) a   *un,* | and
   b   *.. se   harren   ok   puters,* | they have-PAST too turkeys
   'And they had turkeys as well.' (Lisa)

- 7 out of 16 V3-token occur in prosodic sentences that are spread across two or multiple IUs (see 3-4)
- Differently put, of all tokens with preverbal material in a different IU 39% show V3 structures

4. Previous subject mention (p-value = .236)
- V3 is favored when the subject has not been mentioned in the ten previous IUs
- 12 out of 16 V3-token (75%) show a subject that has not been uttered previously
- Of all tokens with subject which has not been previously uttered, 14% show V3- structures
  - By same speaker: 4/76 or by other speaker: 0/12
  - No mention: 12/85

Discussion

1. Do LG heritage speakers show variation in verb placement in main clauses?

16 out of 173 (9%) main clause token showed V3 structures. Overall, V2-structures appear to be robust.

2. What are the linguistic factors that condition V3?

A logistic regression model showed that V3-structures are favored ...
- With clause initial time adverbials
- With plural person (1st and 3rd)
- When preverbal material in the same clause does not occur in the same IU as the finite verb
- When the subject had not been mentioned in the previous ten IUs

3. What can these findings contribute to the ongoing discussion regarding the occurrence of V3-structures?

- In line with previous research on other contact varieties, the strongest factor for the occurrence of V3-structures is the presence of a temporal adverbial, which may function as discursive frame setters (Freywald et al. 2015). Importantly, temporal adverbials do not necessarily trigger V3 structures

- The use of V3-structures following prosodically detached temporal adverbials may indicate special emphasis or attention markers in discourse (Selting & Kern 2009)

- The fact that V3-structures are favored with subjects that are newly introduced to the discourse is somewhat surprising, as previous studies have hypothesized that (pronominal) subjects with a high degree of accessibility (i.e., previously mentioned in the discourse) would be expected. In combination with prosodic focus, however, introducing a new subject may be logical from an information-structural perspective.

- Like many urban vernaculars and contact varieties, Heritage Low German in the USA allows more than one constituent before the finite verb. These findings tentatively support the idea that V3-structures reflect a syntactic option that can be implemented to fulfil discourse-pragmatic and information-structural needs (see Wiese et al. 2017)

- Due to the small data set, these initial findings are to be considered with caution. Hopefully, future research with a larger data set, including more speakers, more tokens, and a quasi-longitudinal perspective, can provide a more detailed assessment of these trends.

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