
Economy, innovation, and analogy: effects of language contact on English verb fronting

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In Modern English, verbal elements available in T can move up to C in a limited set of contexts, including main clause interrogatives, regularly leading to subject-auxiliary inversion. The loss of lexical verb fronting in English can be seen as conforming to economy principles as the movement step from V to T (and hence to C) is lost. There is no grammaticalisation involved, though, as lexical verbs preserve their lexical features; further, the development cannot be characterised as innovation either since the VP-internal position of lexical verbs was part of the system anyway. Regarding the major word order change from V2 to basic SVO, Kroch & Taylor (1997) show that the loss of V2 took place in two steps, resulting in dialectal variation in Early Middle English: while Southern varieties were similar to Old English in exhibiting verb fronting to C, Northern varieties influenced by Old Norse exhibited verb fronting only to T but not to C (in line with the Old Norse pattern). The loss of verb fronting was thus fostered by language contact, presumably because the available input for language acquisition contained fewer cues for V-to-C movement in declarative contexts. In this scenario, one might argue that language contact fostered the establishment of a less complex pattern. Welsh English exhibits a reverse development in that embedded questions commonly involve T-to-C movement (Paulasto, Penhallurick & Jones 2021):

- (1) a. Did you see [what kind of coal was it]?
b. I asked them in the camp, [**would** they like the plums].

Such patterns are most likely affected by Welsh contact (Paulasto, Penhallurick & Jones 2021). The insertion of a complementiser arguably constitutes a more economical configuration than movement: if so, (1) may be seen as a potential counterexample to economy principles guiding change. However, the patterns are not entirely innovative: the inverted word orders are available in the language anyway in main clauses and were analogically extended to embedded contexts. Analogical change goes further in this variety: cleft constructions either contain the complementiser *that*, or they show verb fronting. While the complementiser option may be favourable in terms of derivational economy, paradigmatic economy fosters the availability of the verb movement option. That is, contact-induced change in this case is only apparently contrary to economy principles.

References: • Kroch, A. & A. Taylor (1997). Verb movement in Old and Middle English: Dialect variation and language contact. In A. van Kemenade & N. Vincent (eds.), *Parameters of morphosyntactic change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 297–325. • Paulasto, H., R. Penhallurick & B. A. Jones (2021). *Welsh English*. Berlin: De Gruyter.