

# Focus and verb order in Early New High German: Historical and contemporary evidence

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## 1 Introduction

Although Modern Standard German has a fixed relative order for verbs in subordinate clauses, Early New High German (ENHG) shows much more variation. In ENHG, the 2-1 order (i.e., the non-finite V followed by the finite V), which is the Modern Standard order, is the more frequent (1a), but it alternates with the 1-2 order (1b). Clusters of three verbs show even more variation, with four possible orders.

- (1) a. *das er in kainer sund verczweiffeln sol*  
that he in no sin despair shall  
'that he should not despair in any sin'
- b. *das der mensch alle sein lebttag nicht anders scholt thun*  
that the person all his life-days nothing else should do  
'that man should do nothing else all the days of his life'

Several factors that favor the 1-2 order in ENHG have been identified (Ebert 1981 among others), including syntagm type, the presence of a stressed separable prefix, and focus.

This paper concentrates on the effect of focus on verb order. The 1-2 order can appear not only when the V itself is focussed, but also when the NP preceeding the verb cluster is focused, as in *nicht anders* in (1b). Of course, determining information structure in an extinct language is problematic, since many cases of focus will be overlooked without intonational clues. Therefore, this paper uses three different kinds of evidence to investigate the extent of the effect of focus on ENHG word order.

# The evidence

## 1.1 ENHG evidence

First, I carried out a corpus study of nearly 3,000 subordinate clauses from the *Bonner Frühneuhochdeutsch-Korpus*, conducting the analysis with the statistics package *GoldVarb 2001*. I tagged the NP preceding the verb cluster in these clauses as old information, new information, or contrastive. With contrastive focus, there is a strong and significant preference for the 1-2 order, and with new information, the effect is less strong but still statistically significant.

The effect of focus on verb order is confirmed by examining two related syntactic phenomena: scrambling and extraposition. Clauses with unscrambled NPs, which tend to be focused, significantly favor the 1-2 order, corroborating the effect of focus on word order. Furthermore, clauses with extraposition, which may also be driven by focus (see Bies 1996), tend to have the 1-2 order.

## 1.2 Standard German evidence

The second type of evidence used in this study comes from Modern Standard German. In the standard language, one syntagm involving three verbs (*werden* + modal + infinitive) allows some word order variation, with 1-3-2 and 3-2-1 fully grammatical and 3-1-2 marginal. Schmid & Vogel (2004) show that the choice of these orders is at least in part dependent on stress. I am currently conducting a follow-up study using Magnitude Estimation (Bard et al. 1996), to attempt to determine exactly which focus conditions favor which orders in the standard language.

## 1.3 Dialectal evidence

Contemporary dialects of German represent the third kind of evidence. In Schmid & Vogel (2004), the effect of stress on word order was even more dramatic in the dialects than in the standard language. Moreover, unlike the standard language, some dialects allow the kind of variation one sees in ENHG, even with clusters of two verbs. Lötscher (1978) points out that in Swiss German, the focus possibilities in the Verb Projection Raising construction (similar to the 1-2 order) are different than with other orders.

In interviews with speakers of Swabian, I have determined that the 2-1 order allows for several focus interpretation, but the 1-2 order forces focus on the object:

- (2) a. *I glaub, dass Glaus* [<sub>F</sub> *des BUACH*] *had glese*.  
 I think that Klaus the book has read  
 'I think that Klaus has read the book.'
- b. *ⁱI glaub, dass Glaus* [<sub>F</sub> *des BUACH had glese*].  
 I think that Klaus the book has read  
 'I think that Klaus has read the book.'
- c. *ⁱI glaub, [<sub>F</sub> dass Glaus des BUACH had glese]*.  
 I think that Klaus the book has read  
 'I think that Klaus has read the book.'

This paper will report on a similar, ongoing study on focus and verb order in Austrian dialects.

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