

Variation and linguistic theory. Main clause word order as a foregrounder in spoken Danish subordinate clauses

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Linguistic theories come in many versions, not equally well suited to account for the variable and non-categorical data found in sociolinguistic studies. We will present a study of word order variation in subordinate clauses of spoken Danish, which is based on both functional and generativist analyses of the semantico-pragmatics of the variant resembling main clause word order (an instance of so-called ‘main clause phenomena’ (MCP) in subordinate clauses (Heycock 2007; Aelbrecht et al. 2012). Previous studies of this word order variation in Scandinavian languages are mainly intuition-based, whether functional or generativist (Vikner 1995; Wiklund et al. 2009; Christensen & Heltoft 2010; Heycock et al. 2010), whereas our study is based on observational data, viz. a corpus of sociolinguistic interviews from two Danish localities (the capital Copenhagen and a small, rural town in West Jutland). The data form part of the LANCHART corpus (<http://lanchart.hum.ku.dk/>) of modern spoken Danish, and consist of > 2 mio. words. The sub-study of complement clauses (typically *that*-clauses) presented here consists of 3464 occurrences, a number enabling sound, statistical analyses.

In the Danish tradition, the two word orders have been called *main clause* and *subordinate clause word order* (Diderichsen 1946). The first has sentence adverbials and negations *after* the finite verb (1), the second *before* the finite verb (1’):

(1) (*det er også en af grundene til*) *at vi tør næsten ikke at flytte* (V>Adv)
(that is also one of the reasons to) that we dare almost not to move

(1’) *at vi næsten ikke tør at flytte* (Adv>V)
that we almost not dare to move

‘that’s also one of the reasons that we almost don’t dare to move’

The main hypothesis tested was that main clause word order, V>Adv, signals foregrounded information (‘main point of utterance’ or ‘informatively more important’) (cp. Tomlin 1985; Simons 2007; Christensen & Heltoft 2010). Several factors have been included in the analyses as an operationalization of foregrounding, ranging from type of matrix predicate to presence of conjunction. The effects of the different factors were assessed through mixed-effects modelling in R (Baayen 2008; Johnson 2008).

Our results show that V>Adv is much more frequent in subordinate clauses than commonly assumed (amounting to 64% for complement clauses), and even found in contexts where it should be unacceptable according the semantico-pragmatic hypothesis, i.e., factive clauses. The distribution is furthermore in direct contrast to some of the formal constraints suggested by intuition-based analyses.

We discuss the consequences of this study for linguistic theory, and suggest some theoretical aspects needed to encompass the type of variation that we have found, especially related to the tight relation between formal syntax and semantico-pragmatics and the fact that hypotheses about linguistic structure are confirmed as statistical tendencies rather than invariant coding.

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