

Verb placement variation in Germanic contact varieties - Evidence from heritage speakers of Low German in Iowa

A number of recent studies have found that some Germanic contact-varieties (i.e. dialects spoken by heritage speakers or bilingual groups), show notable variation in verb placement, instead of prescriptive verb-second (V2) structures. Evidence of verb-third (V3) placement has been found in urban vernaculars for example in Norwegian (Opsahl 2010), Dutch (Freywald et al. 2015: 84), and *Kiezdeutsch*, an ethnolect spoken in some major German cities, as shown in (1):

- (1) *dann die sind zur Ubahn gerannt*
then they be-AUX to the metro run-PART
'Then, they ran to the metro.'

(adapted from Wiese et al. 2012)

Such structures have also been observed in some German(ic) heritage varieties, such as American Norwegian (Alexiadou & Lohndal 2018) or Wisconsin German (Sewell 2015). It seems that the V3-structures typically occur with Adverbial-Subject-Verb-(Object) structures, but why such structures occur at higher rates in speakers of contact-varieties seems to be under debate. While Wiese et al. (2017: 31) and te Velde (2017) suggest discursive motivations for V3 in urban vernacular varieties, Pecht (2019: 91) finds that *Cité Duits*, a moribund dialect fused from Belgian Dutch, German and Maaslands spoken in Belgium, has undergone "systematic recombination of linguistic features from different source varieties" with solidified V3 structures as the communal norm. Studies on heritage language speakers (see e.g., Alexiadou & Lohndal 2018, Sewell 2015), on the other hand, propose that V3 structures occur because of cross-linguistic interference from English, while Wirrer (2009) claims individual attrition in Low German (LG) heritage speakers in the USA may be the main reason for verb placement variation.

Low German (LG), like many other Germanic languages, usually shows V2 structures in main clauses, and verb final position in subordinate clauses (Langer 2003: 284). The occurrence of V3 in main clauses, however, has been described in passing for East Frisian LG speakers in the USA. Bender (1980: 83) provides two examples and states that "English syntax left its mark", and Wirrer (2009: 141), gives three examples and claims that his informants, who he defines as *Sprachvergesser* ('language forgetters'), show considerable difficulties to use "correct" Low German syntactical structures. One such example of "incorrect" verb placement is exemplified in (2):

- (2) *In 2001 wi sünd in Arizona ween.*
in two thousand one we be-AUX in Arizona be-PART
'In 2001, we were in Arizona.'

(adapted from Wirrer 2009: 141)

While both Bender and Wirrer associate such structures with a decline of the speakers' individual linguistic abilities, speakers of other German(ic) languages who are in close contact with other languages seem to show similar variation in verb placement (e.g. Wiese et al. 2017, Pecht 2019).

In a pilot study, four elderly heritage speakers of East Frisian Low German in Iowa were interviewed about memories of childhood and farming in their heritage language. The

conversations were transcribed and the first 50 consecutive clauses with finite verbs were extracted (n= 153 main clauses). Verb placement shows (almost) no variation in subordinate clauses, but V3-placement in main clauses occurs at a rate of 9% (14 out of 153 tokens). Besides an observed disparity of V3-usage between the speakers (one speaker produced 9 tokens), a logistic regression model showed that V3-placement seems to be disfavored with singular subjects and strongly favored with clause initial adjuncts (i.e. time adverbials). Therefore, this systematic variationist approach shows that V2-structures are still very robust, and that V3-structures, where they do occur, are highly predictable by linguistic factors. Moreover, the Adverbial-Subject-Verb-(Object) pattern described for a number of Germanic contact-varieties seems to also hold for this small group of elderly heritage speakers.

Thus, the phenomenon can hardly be considered a mere sign of language attrition but may actually be an indicator of communal language change (Pecht 2019), or serve a discursive motivation (Wiese et al. 2017). Given the lack of studies on verb placement variation in LG in the US, this paper provides a systematic study of this phenomenon in a highly understudied heritage language group. In addition to a description of the (socio-) linguistic factors that condition the use of V3-placement, I aim to address underlying questions of individual language attrition versus communal language change.

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