

Gea Dreschler

Passives and the Loss of Verb Second

A Study of Syntactic and Information-Structural Factors

During the fourteenth and fifteenth century, the English language went through two quite remarkable changes: it lost the verb-second (V2) system that is characteristic of many Germanic languages, and it saw the introduction of three cross-linguistically rare passives. This thesis investigates whether these two developments are connected, not just because they take place around the same time, but more importantly, because the passive and V2 perform similar information-structural functions in the language. Using this case study, this thesis aims to shed light on the interaction between syntax and information structure.

The studies in this thesis show that the loss of V2 has larger consequences than just a change in the order of subject and finite verb. After the loss of V2, English gradually becomes a predominantly subject-initial language and the presubject position becomes mostly reserved for contrastive or focused material. It is argued that this new organization of the initial positions in the clause and the importance of the subject as an unmarked theme lead to an increase in 'subject strategies', i.e. means for putting an argument in subject position: passives, middles and a range of non-agentive subjects. The loss of V2 also entails a reduction in the number of options for rearranging arguments to achieve a given-before-new order of information, an important cross-linguistic function. The passive remains as one of the few options to achieve this effect and it is argued that this is the reason for the increase in the use of the passive in English after the loss of V2.

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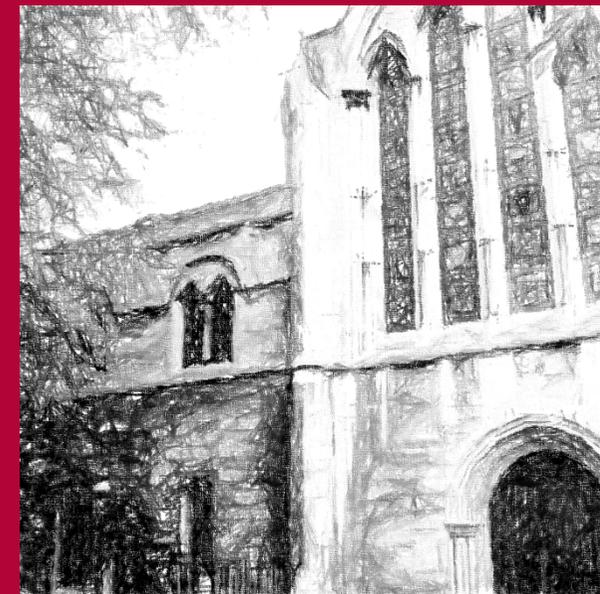
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