Verb-third in French Flemish: a microvariational approach to the interplay between syntax, discourse and social context

This paper investigates verb-third (V3) word order in French Flemish, a group of moribund Dutch dialects spoken in the north of France that are part of the West Flemish (WF) dialect group. The French Flemish language region was originally part of Flanders, but annexed by France in 1678. Particularly after the French Revolution, the incorporation in France marked the decline of Flemish, as French language policy aimed to eradicate minority languages, e.g. by a ban on Flemish education leading to (unbalanced) bilingualism and, subsequently, severe endangerment.

Whereas V2 is the default word order in main clauses in most Germanic varieties, French Flemish displays frequent V3 structures, typically of the type XP –Subject – Vfin – … (1).

(1) en als we halfweg kwamen een lietje over de kerk ik rollebolde toen over de hond
and if we halfway came a little over the church I stumbled then over the dog
'When we were about halfway, a little beyond the church, I stumbled over the dog.'

This study shows that syntactic microvariation offers concrete insight into how social conditions shape grammatical structure. It is based on a microcomparative analysis of dialect recordings from 52 French Flemish locations from the *Gesproken Corpus van de zuidelijk-Nederlandse Dialecten* (GCND, ca. 1960s) made across the French Flemish language area. For these recordings, time-aligned transcriptions of the recordings were made and manually annotated for word order patterns, speaker metadata, and discourse structure. The resulting variation patterns were then cross-checked against a recent corpus of interviews with a similar setup (2020–2024).

I show that V3 patterns in French Flemish are considerably more common than in the other West Flemish dialects spoken across the Belgian-French border. More importantly, I offer an explanation for this asymmetry. While previous accounts have typically framed V3 in French Flemish (or West Flemish more generally) as either a remnant of Ingvaeonic syntax or the result of contact with French, this study develops a multi-faceted explanation that accounts for the interplay between syntax, discourse and social context.

Although other factors also play a role in the high frequency of V3 in French Flemish, this paper focuses on four language-external conditions that distinguish French Flemish from other Dutch or Germanic dialects: (1) language contact and bilingualism, (2) endogenous developments specific to French Flemish and (3) the spoken nature of the data.

(1) First, long-term **language contact** with Romance varieties (i.e. Picard and later French) seems to have led to a loosening of the V2 constraint in the clause-initial field. This is visible in the frequent co-occurrence of fronted adverbials and preverbal subjects, resulting in the combination of various elements into a very extensive preverbal field, yielding V3 or later structures with up to ten preverbal constituents. Furthermore, a number of discourse markers borrowed from French have developed that do not occur in other West Flemish dialects. An example is *tandis que*, which in many cases no longer behaves as a conjunction (like in French), but instead often operates as a discourse marker introducing declarative main clauses in French Flemish.

(2) In addition to contact effects, French Flemish shows **endogenous developments** not attested in neighbouring dialects, which are due to the longstanding isolation of other Dutch varieties. One

example is the frequently occurring clause-initial particle *'t maakt*, which functions as a discourse marker (without a subsequent subordinating *dat*).

(3) The high frequency of the patterns under discussion, as well as their form, is also shaped by the **spoken nature of the data**. French Flemish is a language that is only transmitted through speech. The corpus study shows clear evidence of a much higher frequency of linear V3 orders in free dialect speech (in which the speaker is not interrupted) compared to other types of data from the same area. Furthermore, certain types of structures, such as V3 sentences with left dislocation in which the main clause lacks a resumptive element, are only found in spoken language.

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