

**Der Innsbrucker Linguistische Arbeitskreis (ILAK)
und das Institut für Germanistik der Philologisch-Kulturwissenschaftlichen Fakultät**

laden herzlich ein zum Vortrag von

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**Explaining V2 to V1 in Welsh:
a comparison of a formal and
Diachronic Construction Grammar approach**

**Donnerstag, 9. November 2023, 19:00 Uhr
Geiwi-Turm, SR 40432**

Abstract:

Besides the medieval Germanic and Romance languages, the medieval Brythonic Celtic languages Middle Welsh and Middle Breton have also been argued to exhibit verb-second (V2) phenomena (Willis 1998; Meelen 2016; 2018). While Breton has maintained V2 word order to the present day, Modern Welsh has generalised verb-initial (V1) order, which is the predominant word order not only in subordinate and negative main clauses (as in both Middle Welsh and Middle Breton), but also in affirmative main clauses. In seeking to explain the development of V1 in Welsh, Willis (1998) proposed within a Principles and Parameters (P&P) framework an analysis of V2 in Middle Welsh where absolute V1 was ungrammatical in affirmative main clauses (i.e. a strict V2 constraint), but became grammatical after a resetting of the V2 parameter to negative in the 16th century (“the loss of V2”). While Willis’ analysis is elegant in that it seeks to link a number of disparate phenomena – such as the loss of preverbal particles associated with the fronting of constituents, the cliticization of unaccented preverbal pronominal subjects and the expansion of the expletive construction (posited as leading changes to parameter resetting) – to the rise of V1, this analysis is open to challenge both in terms of the Welsh data and in terms of the cross-linguistic definition of V2 phenomena.

Using a diachronic construction grammar framework and drawing on data from a corpus of Early Modern Welsh texts (c.1550-c.1750), I will argue that while the end result of the word order change was systemic, the process itself was gradual and piecemeal (Currie 2013). First, I will show that the Welsh data is problematic for the P&P analysis, on the one hand, because it is not certain that absolute V1 was ungrammatical in affirmative main clauses in Middle Welsh (the construction was attested but rare in Middle Welsh prose and common in Middle Welsh poetry), and, on the other hand, because the apparent chronology and gradualness of the various leading and trailing changes

as evidenced in the data does not seem to fit the discrete and abrupt scenario of grammatical change consistent with a parameter resetting in the 16th century.

Second, I will discuss some broader theoretical issues which the word order change in Welsh raises concerning both how we define V2 word order and explain its diachronic emergence or loss. There is considerable variation between languages which have been analysed as V2, in particular in the extent to which they also allow V1 and V3 phenomena. Since V1 can commonly occur as a variant order in some V2 languages (e.g. Old English, Old French, Icelandic, Yiddish), it does not seem plausible to define V2 phenomena in terms of a strict V2 requirement (Fontana 1997) and to make the explanation of the rise or loss of V2 hinge upon such a requirement. Instead of a binary, categorial definition of V2, I will argue for a more fuzzy one where various V2 constructions and related discourse-pragmatic phenomena can be generalised to different degrees.

References:

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- Meelen, Marieke. 2016. *Why Jesus and Job spoke bad Welsh: the origin and distribution of V2 orders in Middle Welsh*. Utrecht: LOT publications.
- Meelen, Marieke. 2018. Reconstructing the rise of V2 in Welsh. In: Rebecca Woods & Sam Wolfe (eds). *Rethinking Verb Second*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 426-454.
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Short academic biography:

Oliver Currie is an assistant professor in the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. He has research interests in the fields of historical linguistics, sociolinguistics and translation studies, with a focus on Welsh, English and French. His recent and current research includes work on word order variation and change in Welsh, the sixteenth century Welsh Bible translations, national myths and language status in early modern Wales and Brittany as well as on language controversies surrounding the collection and translation of folktales in the nineteenth century. He did a BA in Anglo Saxon, Norse and Celtic and Modern and Medieval Languages, then an MPhil Linguistics at the University of Cambridge and completed his PhD in Linguistics at the University of Ljubljana on the development of verb-initial word order in Early Modern Welsh.

