A polar approach to Verb Second

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The Germanic languages, with the notable exception of English, are characterized by the distinct syntactic property of verb second (V2): no more than one constituent may precede the finite verb. V2 is primarily associated with declarative main clauses. Importantly, V2 word order involves V-to-C-movement but should not be equalled with it; Yes/no-questions and V1-conditionals display V-to-C-movement without adhering to the V2 restriction. In contrast, subordinate clauses prototypically neither display V2 nor V-to-C movement[1].

Within the generative framework, both V2 and V-to-C movement has generally been assumed to have no deeper syntactic implication besides word order. In the words of Ladusaw (1996:128), verb second "is a fundamental aspect of clause structure which in and of itself has no semantic motivation to enforce it, at least in so far as the formulation of the semantic content of a sentence, the proposition expressed by the clause". Work on V2 in German has questioned the purely syntactic approach to V2, however, and it has been proposed that V2 might have semantic underpinnings (see e.g. Wechsler 1991, Truckenbrodt 2006 and Meinunger 2006).

In this presentation, I will support the idea that V2 is semantically motivated. At the core of my proposal lies the novel observation that V2 and non-local licensing of negative polarity items (NPIs) are mutually exclusive in Swedish. That is, environments licensing V2 do not inherently license NPIs, and environments transparent to NPI-licensing are not V2. The observation holds for all clause types in Swedish; below is a sample of relevant environments:

(1) a. *Sven **har** *någonsin* varit i Paris (V2/V-to-C)
      Sven has   ever been to Paris

b. **Har** Sven *någonsin* varit i Paris? (V1/V-to-C)
      Has Sven   ever   been to Paris

c. Jag tror <u>inte</u>, att Sven *någonsin* **har** varit i Paris (no V2/no V-to-C)
      I think not that Sven   ever   has been to Paris

From the examples in (1), we see that the distribution of NPIs can be related to the three different clause types found in Swedish: V2-clauses do not license NPIs in the absence of an overt licensor (such as negation), whereas V1-clauses do. Clauses not involving V-to-C-move-ment are transparent to NPI-licensing, meaning that an NPI may be licensed by an overt operator (e.g. negation) in a hierarchically superordinate clause.

I will suggest that the distributional patterns of V2 and NPIs respectively can be attributed to a single semantic notion, namely *truth value evaluation*. V2 cannot be licensed by a proposition whose truth-value is impossible to evaluate (e.g. yes/no-questions and conditionals). This generalization holds also for propositions whose truth-value is not at stake in the present discourse (e.g. presupposed or non-asserted complements); V2 is not licensed in such contexts either, as we see from the subordinate clauses in (1c) above. Importantly, these environments are not *inherently* NPI-licensing, but rather *transparent* to NPI-licensing. However, propositions whose truth-value is at stake in the present discourse (i.e. asserted propositions) will license V2 but not NPIs in the absence of an overt operator, as the declarative main clause in (1a) above illustrates.

If my proposal is on the right track, the presence/absence of verb second in Swedish cannot be regarded as semantically empty in the sense of Ladusaw above. Rather, V2 may be seen as a syntactic consequence of the semantic truth-value property of the expressed proposition. Thus, my novel observation of the mutual exclusiveness of V2 and NPI-licensing allows us to question the prevailing view of V2 as being a purely syntactic phenomenon.

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[1] For a discussion on embedded V2 in Swedish, see Andersson (1975).

References

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