On the “variable” behavior of object topicalization in Germanic
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In various Germanic languages, an operation traditionally termed “topicalization” has been observed, by which various XPs may move to the left edge of the clause. This may be observed both in V2 languages, where it triggers subject-verb inversion, and in non-V2 languages as well (1). Previous studies have suggested that different Germanic languages show significant variation in the types of fronting which occur, and the frequency at which it takes place. While the topicalization of contrastive elements is allowed across various Germanic languages, the fronting of unstressed, non-contrastive elements is possible in German but disallowed in Dutch, Icelandic, and English (cf. Chocano 2012, for a detailed review of these claims). For example, the obligatorily unaccented pronoun es in German may be topicalized under the right conditions (2); compare to Icelandic (3) and English (4), in which the same is not possible.

We will show that this apparent variation does not reflect an underlying difference in the syntactic or information structural properties of object topicalization across Germanic. Rather, the observed variation is due to independent differences in the syntax of these languages. This is visible thanks to a cross-Germanic study of object topicalization, including quantitative data on topicalization in English, German, Icelandic, and Dutch.

Frey (2006a,b) proposes that German object topicalization is the result of two distinct types of movement: Formal Movement (FM), which has no interpretive effect but targets only the highest available XP below the C domain; and True A-Bar Movement (TAB), which results in a contrastive interpretation on the topicalized constituent. We expand this analysis to account for topicalization across Germanic, and show how it gives insight into the apparent crosslinguistic variation in the patterns of object topicalization.

Object topicalization via TAB is constant across all Germanic languages, which is particularly visible when we compare parallel translations of a single text, as in the English, Icelandic and German New Testament translations in (5). In each, we see an unambiguous contrastive interpretation on the object, and the object is topicalized across the board.

Since TAB targets only information structurally contrastive elements, non-contrastive topicalization of the sort allowed in German may occur only via FM. This is where Germanic languages show variation, and the result of this variation results from two independent factors: first, FM is inherently a property of V2 languages, and occurs solely to satisfy the V2 constraint. This means that non-contrastive topicalization is entirely disallowed in non-V2 languages, like English. Second, because FM is restricted to the highest available XP, the possible candidates of FM will be limited by the movement operations available in the Middlefield, such as scrambling. Dutch and Icelandic have more restricted types of scrambling than German, and consequently cannot maneuver objects sufficiently high to be candidates of FM (cf. Holmberg 1986; Neeleman 1994). Thus, these languages lack the non-contrastive object topicalization available in German.

The application of a cross-linguistic quantitative study is therefore able to demonstrate that superficial variation in the behavior of object topicalization is due to independent factors, and we are able to show that the syntax of topicalization itself is not subject to variation within Germanic, but is rather a surprisingly stable phenomenon.

(1)  
a. Das _ weiss ich.  
   that.ACC know I.NOM  
b. Það _ veit þég.  
   that.ACC know I.NOM  
c. That, I know.
(2) Ihr Geld ist ja nicht weg, meine Damen und Herren. Es haben jetzt nur andere. ‘Your money is not gone, ladies and gentlemen. It is merely in the possession of others now.’

(3) Fé-ykkar er ekki horfið, dömur mínar og herrar. a. *Pað hafa núna aðrir. it.ACC have now others.NOM
b. ?? Pað hafa aðrir núna.
c. Aðrir hafa pað núna

(4) Your money is not gone, ladies and gentlemen . . .

a. * It, others have now.
b. Others have it now.

(5) a. Die weltl kan euch nicht hassen, mich aber hasset sie the world can you.PL not hate me.ACC PRT hates it.NOM
b. Heimur-inn fær yður eigi hatað, en mig hatar hann world-the can you.PL not hate but me.ACC hates it.NOM
c. The worlde canot hate you. Me it hateth (John 7:7)


Frey, Werner. 2006b. How to get an object-es into the German prefield. In Form, structure and grammar: A festschrift presented to Günther Grewendorf on the occasion of his 60th birthday, 159–185.


