

Why did VSO order become generalised in Welsh but not Breton?

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The Insular Celtic languages are typically associated with VSO word order, but in fact VSO order is a systematic feature only of the Goidelic languages (Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Manx). The Brythonic Celtic languages (Welsh, Breton and Cornish), on the other hand, are characterised by word order variation both across clause types and across time. All three medieval Brythonic languages – Middle Welsh, Breton and Cornish – had verb-medial or verb-second word order in affirmative main clauses but verb-initial order in negative main and in subordinate clauses (Poppe 2000; Willis 1998; Meelen 2016). Only Welsh went on to generalise verb-initial order in affirmative main clauses, while Breton and Cornish maintained non-verb-initial order, with a tendency for SV constructions to predominate (Varin 1979; George 1990; 2009). This paper explores why Welsh developed verb-initial order in affirmative main clauses but Breton did not, although both languages had a similar, though crucially not identical, syntactic starting point and both were continually in contact with dominant SV languages, English in the case of Welsh and French in the case of Breton.

Verb-initial order in Modern Welsh affirmative main clauses in fact comprises different syntactic constructions, which developed as a result of different mechanisms at different times. Two such constructions are:

(1) *Absolute-initial verb order* or *Absolute V1*

Gwel-ais	i	'r	ci	
See-1SG.PAST	I	the	dog	“I saw the dog”

(2) *Affirmative preverbal particle + Verb*

Fe	wel-ais	i	'r	ci	“I saw the dog”
PARTICLE	see-1SG.PAST	I	the	dog	
Mi	wel-odd	e	'r	ci	“He saw the dog”
PARTICLE	see-3SG.PAST	he	the	dog	

The *preverbal particle + verb* construction arose from the grammaticalization of clause-initial personal pronoun subjects (*ef, fe, fo* – “he, it”; *mi* “I”) as general affirmative preverbal particles. Such a change was not possible in Breton, since there was (and still is) no systematic person and number agreement when personal pronoun subjects preceded the verb, as 3SG verbal forms are used across the board (e.g. *me a wel* – I see, *te a wel* – you SG see, *ni a wel* – we see) and the preverbal pronoun alone expresses person. Construction (1), Absolute V1, however, is more difficult to explain simply in terms of “starting” structural differences between Welsh and Breton. The single most significant source of the construction seems to have been the gradual loss of the preverbal particle **y(r)** in Adverb + **(y)r** + Verb constructions followed by a reanalysis (Evans 1968; Willis 1998; Currie 2013). After the loss of **y(r)**, a clause-initial adverb functioning as a clausal connector (as opposed to a verbal argument) could be reanalysed as occurring outside the verbal phrase and similarly the verb could be reanalysed as clause-initial: Adverb + **y(r)** + verb > Adverb + Verb > Adverb, #Verb > #Verb (i.e. Absolute V1). Such a change could theoretically have happened in Breton – as there was a cognate preverbal particle **e(z)** used in a similar way to Welsh **y(r)** – but did not. The paper focuses on this key diachronic syntactic difference between Welsh and Breton, discussing to what extent it could perhaps be explained in terms of structural as well as sociocultural differences between the two languages and how this comparison between Welsh and Breton can in turn contribute to the wider debate on the actuation problem.

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Keywords

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