[S[VO]] as a point of no return – A ratchet effect in diachronic grammar changes

There is consensus that diachronically, the [S[VO]] architecture is an "alternative stable state". With the exception of massive external interference such as superstrate situations with extensive bilingualism, languages with an [S[VO]] clause structure stick to it. OV languages, on the other hand, are diachronically less stable. The diachronic profile of Germanic languages and their split into an OV and an [S[VO]] group provide ready evidence for tracking the details of (the particular evolution of) sentence structure.

The opposite head-complement order in "OV" vs. "VO" languages is merely the most superficial trait. In terms of their systemic properties, the two types differ systematically, for instance with respect to factors that are causal for the strictness of word order, for extraction domains, mandatory subjects (EPP), VP-internal subjects, superiority, passivization of intransitives, etc.

The decisive quality of the [S[VO]] clausal architecture is its particular argument identification mechanism. The arguments of the verbal head (viz. subject, direct object, indirect object) are *structurally uniquely* and unmistakeably defined by their configurationally distinct positions they are 'parked on'. The identification is *exclusively* structural. This is not the case in the head-final architecture. Typically, OV languages identify the arguments primarily morpho-syntactically. This qualitative difference – identification by structural configuration vs. identification by morpho-syntactic (and additional structural) means – amounts to a rachet effect in grammar change, as will be shown.

In a procedural & declarative model of language processing, the primarily structural identification is a *procedural* routine. The morpho-syntactic way, on the other hand, requires primary access to declaratively stored information (case, agreement). Procedural routines are in general less resource consuming than declaratively based routines. So, in the evolution of grammars, properties based on procedural-memory routines prevail and declarative ones get reduced. This amounts to a grammatical rachet effect. No language is known to have returned to a morpho-syntactic make up like Old English, starting from a situation as in modern English. The inverse is well-known (see also the metamorphosis of Latin into Romance languages).

In the presentation, diachronic evidence mainly from Germanic OV an VO languages as well as psycholinguistic evidence will be the basis for the explication of the grammatical processes underlying the diachronic developments sketched above.