

# Verb Initial Declaratives in the History of German

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It is a well-known observation that Germanic languages with a well-established V2 grammar may also exhibit patterns of verb-initial declaratives. In modern German, verb-initial declaratives are more or less restricted to the narrative type (Önnerfors 1997, Reis 2000), and even this type is not very productive (Oppenrieder 2013). Old High German, on the other hand, behaves as other Germanic languages such as Icelandic or Swedish, exhibiting a range of different types of verb-initial clauses in earlier stages of the language (Axel 2007, Booth & Beck 2021, Platzack 1987). Besides narrative inversion, existential and presentational clauses (Hinterhölzl & Petrova 2010) as well as impersonal constructions and instances of *pro*-drop also yield verb-initial patterns in Old High German (Axel 2007). The sharp decline of verb-initial patterns in Middle High German is attributed to the emergence of the expletive element *es* as well as a general strengthening of the V2 grammar. Coniglio (2012) states that there is a continuous development from Middle High German to modern German regarding the limited use of verb-initial declaratives.

Comprehensive corpus studies of Early New High German (1350-1650), however, testify to a wide use of verb-initial clauses during this period in the history of German, questioning the assumption of their continuous use at a low level since Middle High German. In this talk, I will first introduce new data into the discussion, drawn from 15th- and 16th-century narratives, supporting the observation that verb-initial declaratives are frequently used in Early New High German. Building on these data, I will establish that verb-initial declaratives fall into the narrative type, exhibiting classical diagnostics (Kossuth 1978): frequently attested in the narratives under investigation, they signal discourse continuity in settings of animated storytelling. Discourse-initially they do not appear. Their postverbal subject is an anaphoric topic, referring to an antecedent in the immediately preceding discourse, cf. *Agley* and *sy* ‘she’ in (1). If the subject is not topical, it may be omitted.

- (1) Die schön Agley, des küniges tochter, lag nach dabey und müst hören, daz sy vast ungeren hort.  
**Erseüfczet sy** und rüfft offt den tod, daz er sy nâme, seyð daz sy nit Rial und einen andern werden solt.  
(1481: Wilhelm v. Österreich)  
‘The beautiful Agley, the king’s daughter, was lying close by and had to hear what she disliked very much. **She sighed** and cried out several times for death to come and get her if she was not to be married to Rial but to someone else.’

According to Behaghel (1932: 37) and Maurer (1926: 199), the revival of verb-initial declaratives in Early New High German is due to Latin influence, with the earliest attestations found in texts that stick relatively closely to the Latin original. In the present paper, I challenge this view, arguing that the striking increase in the frequency of verb-initial declaratives in the 15th and 16th centuries is motivated by information structure. Across languages, the influence of information structure on word order has also been demonstrated for Old Icelandic (Booth & Beck 2021) and Old English (Bech & Salvesen 2014), triggering the question why we observe the obvious impact of information packaging as late as Early New High German (also supported by the use of verb-final declaratives to express background information, cf. Demske (2018)). In my view, the prominent role of information structure is due to the emergence of prose as a new literary form of storytelling at the turn of the medieval to the early modern period (Buschinger 2010).

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