

At the beginning was the verb:

Word order change and style shifting in the sixteenth-century Welsh Bible translations

VSO order is regarded as characteristic of Modern Welsh, but Welsh has not been consistently VSO throughout its history. In Middle Welsh (c.1200–c.1500), the prototypical verb-initial construction, with a finite verb in absolute-initial position (*Absolute-initial verb order* or *AIV order*) in a positive declarative main clause (PDMC), was rare in prose, which had a predominantly verb-medial order, but common in poetry. AIV order becomes more frequent in prose texts from the second half of the 16th century, but for at least two centuries after that we find extreme variation between individual writers. In the sixteenth-century Bible translations we also find significant intra-writer variation between different books of the Bible. William Salesbury's 1567 translation of the *Psalms* is the first continuous prose text in Welsh with frequent AIV order (approx. 20% of PDMCs), but AIV order remains uncommon in his 1567 New Testament. William Morgan's complete 1588 translation of the Bible (a revised translation of the 1567 New Testament and *Psalms* and new translation of the rest of the Old Testament not previously translated) amplifies and extends William Salesbury's pattern of intra-writer variation: AIV order is more frequent in Morgan's *Psalms* than Salesbury's (approx. 40% of PDMCs) and is also used frequently in other poetic books of the Old Testament (e.g. *Song of Songs*, *Isaiah*), but is much less frequent in prose books of the Old Testament (e.g. *Esther*, *Ecclesiastes*) and New Testament. This paper seeks to understand the significance of the intra-writer variation by exploring the following questions:

- i) Can we explain the intra-writer variation in terms of style shifting combining both literary and sociolinguistic senses of *style*: literary, by analysing the potential literary motivations for style-shifting (the Bible translators appear to have used a syntactic feature perceived to be associated with poetry to add a poetic quality to prose translations of Biblical Hebrew poetry), and sociolinguistic, by utilising sociolinguistic variationist methodology as well as the sociolinguistic concept of style as “the locus of the individual's internalization of broader social distributions of variation” (Rickford and Eckert 2001:1)?
- ii) Is the individual (inter- and intra-writer) variation observed in Early Modern Welsh unusual and can broader theoretical insights be drawn, for example in understanding the mechanisms and diffusion of syntactic change?

Reference

Rickford, John R. and Penelope Eckert 2001. Introduction. In John R. Rickford and Penelope Eckert (eds.), *Style and Sociolinguistic Variation*, 1–18. Cambridge: CUP.