



## Low German with a Swedish twist - Contact-induced word order transfer in the 15th century<sup>☆</sup>



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Low German word order in 15th century letters varies between areas.
- In Low German letters from Swedish cities, the word order is influenced by Swedish.
- The influence seems to be due to Low German scribes taking Swedish dictation.

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### ABSTRACT

This paper deals with differences in word order between two sets of Low German letters from the 15th century: letters sent from Swedish cities and letters sent from other parts of the Hanseatic sphere. In the letters originating from Sweden, the so-called brace construction (whereby the finite and non-finite verbs are separated by a non-subject argument) is, just as in 15th century Swedish, evenly distributed across main and subordinate clauses; in non-Swedish letters, on the other hand, the brace is predominantly a main clause word order. The paper argues that this difference can be explained by the scribal practices of the Swedish chancelleries, involving instantaneous transference from (dictated) Swedish to (written) Low German.

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### 1. Introduction

The nature of the Scandinavian-Low German contact in the Middle Ages has been investigated extensively in the past. One of the lingering questions concerns whether this contact was between (to some extent) mutually intelligible varieties, i.e. dialect contact, or between varieties that were so different that monolinguals could not understand each other, i.e. language contact. In the traditional literature, it was (more or less implicitly) assumed that active bilingualism was commonplace, which, in turn, would be an indicator of language contact [35]; cf. also Ref. [19]. However, since the

early 1990s, scholars have grown increasingly skeptical of this old truth [14,2,3]. Nowadays, dialect contact, involving so called semi-communication [12], is seen as the unmarked characterization of the Scandinavian-Low German contact situation [7].

Recently, I have entered the scene with a couple of articles about word order variation in late mediaeval Swedish and Low German [23,24]. In Ref. [23], I claim that Low German influenced Swedish word order, but that the influence was superficial, revealing a flawed perception (in the sense of Ref. [31]) of the source language, which would indicate a lack of active bilingualism. In Ref. [24], however, this conclusion is refuted; instead, I argue that there was, in fact, mutual syntactic influence between actively bilingual individuals, as evidenced by the presence of Swedish word order in the local Low German variety of Stockholm.

In this paper, I will continue the debate that I started in Ref. [23,24] about how word order variation might shed light on the nature of the Swedish-Low German contact in the late Middle Ages.

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I will suggest that what looks like Swedish-influenced word order in Low German texts from Sweden has a different status than hitherto assumed. At this time (i.e. around 1500), Swedish and Low German allowed more or less the same ordering of a finite verb, an argument and a non-finite verb. However, the languages differed with respect to how frequently some orders occurred in actual usage. More specifically, placing an argument between the verbs in subordinate clauses was common in Swedish, but occurred only sporadically in continental Low German. On the other hand, Low German texts from Sweden contain almost as many inter-verbal arguments in subordinate contexts as do Swedish texts.

I will argue that this convergence of word orders is not a case of L2 transfer (as I claim in Ref. [24]). Rather, the Low German language in a Swedish setting is the product of the environment in which it was created: Low German scribes composed letters in their mother tongue, but these letters were based on Swedish dictation. To support this account, I will present two sorts of evidence. First, there are no L2 traits below the syntactic level (as shown by Ref. [16]), which is unexpected if we are indeed dealing with some sort of L2 Low German. Second, contemporary comments about scribal problems show, indirectly, that dictating messages in Swedish to Low German scribes was a common procedure in the Swedish chancelleries.

A prerequisite for such a production process being successful is that both scribe and sender have a receptive (but not necessarily active) knowledge of the other variety, i.e. of Swedish and of Low German respectively. However, some scribes were not used to taking Swedish dictation. And outside the Swedish realm, Swedish was clearly perceived as a foreign language.

## 2. Embracing the argument across the board

In this paper, we will be concerned with a certain type of word order that involves a finite (*Vf*) and a non-finite verb (*Vnf*) being intercepted by a (non-subject) argument (*A*), i.e. *Vf-A-Vnf*. This word order is sometimes referred to as the brace construction, since the two verb forms embrace the argument, as it were. In the German tradition, building on Ref. [6], the verbal brace (German *Verbal-klammer*) is seen as a main clause phenomenon; corresponding strings in subordinate clauses are thus referred to by other labels (e.g. *Distanzstellung*; see Ref. [17]:247). Here and in the following, I use the term brace as referring to the order *Vf-A-Vnf* in all clause types. In that way, my use of the term is wider than the traditional one. At the same time, it is more limited, excluding orders where there are only adjuncts between the verb forms. The reason for this limitation is that I want to be able to compare my results with those I presented in Ref. [22], where all braces include inter-verbal arguments.

### 2.1. Deriving the brace

During the 15th and 16th centuries, the brace occurred in both Swedish (Sw) and Low German (LG) texts, in both main ((1)) and subordinate ((2)) clauses:

- (1) a. *so wille wi se noch gerne mit rechte Vf-A-Vnf* (LG)  
 so would we them still gladly with justice  
*vorcheden*  
 separate.INF  
 ‘then, we would gladly separate them legally’  
 (Lübeck:1883)

- b. *Hwar aff skal iagh thetta weta? Vf-A-Vnf* (Sw)  
 where of shall I this know.INF  
 ‘How am I supposed to know this?’  
 (GVB: Luke, 1:18)
- (2) a. *dat he scholde syne sunde bichten Vf-A-Vnf* (LG)  
 that he should his sins confess.INF  
 ‘that he should confess his sins’  
 (15th century Low German, from Ref. [17]:249)
- b. *wm I wilen han fordarffwa Vf-A-Vnf* (Sw)  
 if you.PL would him corrupt.INF  
 ‘if you would corrupt him’  
 (7vise:181)

In fact, all logically possible orderings of *Vf*, *A* and *Vnf*, except *Vnf-A-Vf*,<sup>1</sup> can be found in both languages; see (3–6) below.<sup>2</sup>

- (3) a. *dat Christus in er wolde vormeren Vf-Vnf-A* (LG)  
 that C in you.PL would expand.INF  
*den ghelouen*  
 the promise  
 ‘that Christ would expand his promise to you’  
 (15th Low German, from Ref. [17]:141)
- b. *att han wille göra fredz förbund Vf-Vnf-A* (Sw)  
 that he wanted.PST make.INF peace alliance  
 ‘that he wanted to make a peace alliance’  
 (Petri:2)
- (4) a. *dat he my sall danken A-Vf-Vnf* (LG)  
 that he me shall thank.INF  
 ‘that he shall thank me’  
 (Sture:94)
- b. *huad han och thet wille seia A-Vf-Vnf* (Sw)  
 if he too that wanted.PST say.INF  
 ‘if he wanted to say that too’  
 (Early 16th century example, from Ref. [8]:160)
- (5) a. *als wi ju eer gebeden hebben A-Vnf-Vf* (LG)  
 as we MOD.PART you.PL asked.PTCP have.PRS  
 ‘as we have asked you’  
 (Lübeck:1884)
- b. *såsom the oss sagdt haffua A-Vnf-Vf* (Sw)  
 as they us said.PTCP have.PRS  
 ‘as they have said to us’

<sup>1</sup> For explanations of the non-occurrence of *Vnf-A-Vf* across Germanic, see Ref. [1]; cf. also [26].

<sup>2</sup> In both Low German and Swedish, the orders in (4–6) are restricted to subordinate clauses; the order in (3) may occur in main clauses if *Vf* is next to the subject (as in (3b)); see 2.4 for discussion.

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