
A CONSPIRACY THEORY FOR THE LOSS OF V2 IN ROMANCE*

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ABSTRACT This article presents corpus data from Middle French and Later Old Venetan to argue that a conspiracy of factors is necessary to destabilise the V2 property. Specifically, we suggest that late-stage V2 grammars can be rendered unstable through specialisation of the prefield, specialisation of the information-structural values of subjects occurring in inversion structures, an overall preference for left-peripheral base-generation over movement, and certain types of V3. Importantly, we conclude – in contrast to much previous work on V2 loss, but in line with recent analysis by [Poletto \(2019\)](#) – that no single factor alone will trigger the loss of V2.

1 BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

1.1 *Background and Aims*

The Verb Second (V2) property is arguably one of the best studied properties within generative grammar; it has also played an influential role in the development of a formal theory of syntactic change, with particular prominence in early work ([Lightfoot 1979, 1989](#), [Van Kemenade 1987](#), [Kroch 1989](#), [Roberts 1993](#)). As a result of early and subsequent research, there is an increasing prominent analysis that many Indo-European languages went through a V2 stage, yet only some of the Indo-European languages maintain full V2 today: all the Medieval Romance languages – with the possible exception of Old Sardinian ([Lombardi 2007](#), [Wolfe 2015b](#)) – went through a V2 phase, yet only the Rhaeto-Romance languages are V2 languages today ([Haiman & Benincà](#)

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1992, Poletto 2002, Casalicchio & Cognola 2018);¹ within the Celtic family, a V2 phase is assumed for at least Old and Middle Welsh (Willis 1998, 2007, Meelen 2016, 2020) and Old Irish (Carnie, Pyatt & Harley 1994, Doherty 2000, Adger 2006, Newton 2007), yet only Breton preserves V2 today (Jouitteau 2007); within Germanic, it is well known that V2 characterises the majority of the modern languages, with the notable exception of English, though a body of work suggests that the emergence of V2 is not a recent phenomenon but that the property is present in many of the early Germanic varieties for which we have textual records (Ferraresi 1997, 2005, Hinterhölzl & Petrova 2009, Axel 2007, 2009, Walkden 2014, 2015); though work on the Anatolian languages is less extensive, Proto-Anatolian can also be assumed to have featured V2(-like) effects (Garrett 1992, 1994, Luraghi 1998, Sideltsev & Molina 2015). An understanding of the factors which can destabilise the V2 property and eventually lead to its loss therefore has the potential to shed light on some of the most significant word-order changes to have taken place in the Indo-European family.

In light of considerable advances in our understanding of the V2 property and the left periphery in more general terms, this article offers a brief review of previous approaches to the loss of V2 and explores their predictions as well as some of their limitations. We will then present data from Middle French and data from a novel corpus of Later Old Venetan (Paduan, Venetian, and Veronese) which give us insight into late-stage V2 grammars to formulate a new theory of V2 loss. The resulting *Conspiracy Theory* for the loss of V2 will suggest that a convergence of factors, rather than a single trigger, is needed for V2 to be lost. The significant prediction of this account is that there will be overlap between the features which destabilise V2 crosslinguistically, but considerable variation in this domain, which in turn are conditioned by the nature of the grammar in which V2 is lost.

1.2 V2 and its Loss

1.2.1 V2 – A Changed Understanding

Before discussing what a refined theory of V2 loss may look like, it is worth reflecting briefly on how the conception of V2 has changed since the earliest work on the loss of V2 was undertaken. Under several classic conceptions of V2 (Koster 1975, Den Besten 1983, Vikner 1995, Holmberg & Platzack 1995), the formal property is viewed as entailing two components: one of these is responsible for verb movement and the other is responsible for movement of a

¹ For an alternative perspective, under which some of the Medieval Romance languages were not V2, see Sitaridou (2012).

phrase to the clause-initial position. In classic approaches the verb movement would thus target C^0 and the phrasal movement Spec-CP:

- (1) $[_{CP} \text{ V2 Initial Constituent } [_C \text{ Verb}]]$

It is worth stressing that many of the early accounts of the V2 place considerable emphasis on the ‘flexibility’ of the initial position in being able to host a very wide range of constituents (Platzack 1986; Diesing 1990: 44; Fontana 1993: 100; Lightfoot 1995: 40; Vikner 1995: 41; Holmberg & Platzack 1995: 71). Oft-cited examples such as (2) are illustrative in this regard, as they show that constituents belonging to a range of grammatical categories can occupy the initial position in Modern Danish, as in other V2 systems:

- (2) a. *Peter har ofte drukket kaffe om morgenen*
Peter has often drunk coffee in morning-the
b. *Kaffe har Peter ofte drukket om morgenen*
coffee has Peter often drunk in morning-the
c. *Om morgenen har Peter ofte drukket kaffe*
in morning-the has Peter often drunk coffee
‘Peter has often drunk coffee in the morning’ (Modern Danish)
(Vikner 1995: 47)

Although the explosion of work on the sheer diversity of V2 systems which has emerged in the last two decades has led to refinements of this account, three empirical points are particularly important to note before continuing.

Firstly, although all V2 systems appear to have in common that a diverse range of constituents can occupy the initial position of the clause, certain restrictions can apply on the grammatical or pragmatic nature of these constituents which are distinct from one language to another; in early work on Scandinavian, it was noted that negation can only satisfy V2 in certain varieties but not others (Holmberg & Platzack 1995; Holmberg 2015: 350-351). Moreover, a body of recent work has shown that Hanging Topics and frame-setting adverbials and clauses can act as the first constituent of a V2 clause in some Modern Germanic and Medieval Romance varieties but not others (e.g. Axel 2009; Vance, Donaldson & Steiner 2009; Donaldson 2012; Wolfe 2016b; Walkden 2017; Greco & Haegeman 2020). More extensive variation is attested when we consider the pragmatic role of the initial constituent: Bohnacker & Rosén (2008) show marked differences in acceptable pragmatic values when comparing Swedish and German object-initial V2-clauses; a body of work on Medieval Romance suggests that fronting of initial foci was far more restricted in some languages than others (Wolfe 2016a, 2018b); and Willis (1998) shows that the acceptability of initial foci is subject to diachronic variation in the his-

tory of Welsh. Taken together, these data suggest that although the initial position of V2 clauses may host a wide variety of constituents, the syntactic and – to a greater extent – pragmatic characteristics of these constituents are subject to crosslinguistic variation.

Secondly, recent work on historical, non-standard, and non-Germanic V2 languages has revealed that V2 grammars can be more permissive of multiple constituents in the prefield that was originally thought (Axel 2007; Petrova 2012; Walkden 2015; Meklenborg 2020a; Meelen 2020; Ledgeway 2008; Wolfe 2017; Sluckin 2021: 269–291): the typology is best conceived of as a continuum where the strictest V2 systems such as Modern German and Dutch have a highly restricted class of V3-triggers (3), grammars in the middle of the continuum allow a relatively wide class of V3-triggering clauses and adverbials (e.g. Old High German as discussed by Axel 2004 and Later Old French as in Wolfe 2018c), and those at the most permissive end of the continuum permit a wide range of constituents to co-occur before the finite verb; this is the case for Old Central and Southern Italo-Romance varieties (Ledgeway 2008, Poletto 2014, Wolfe 2015a) (4), among others.

- (3) a. *Ich bin beschäftigt*
 I be.1sg busy
 ‘I am busy’ (Modern German)
- b. *Heute bin ich beschäftigt*
 today be.1sg I busy
 ‘Today I am busy’ (Modern German)
- c. **Heute ich bin beschäftigt*
- (4) *Allora questi andò e ricombatté*
 then this go.3sg.pst and fight-again.3sg.pst
 ‘And then he went and fought again’ (Old Italian)

(Novellino 40, Benincà 2004: 276)

In formal terms, these findings have led to the expansion of approaches to V2 assuming verb and phrasal movement to a richly layered CP (Rizzi 1997), which can thus accommodate multiple constituents above the moved verb in a way the classic account cannot. Regardless of formal implementation, however, the important conclusion for our purposes is that the core V2 properties of verb and constituent movement into the left periphery can remain stable over centuries while the grammar ‘tolerates’ verb-third orders.²

Third and finally, we can comment briefly on the interaction between the

² See, for example, Axel (2004) and Walkden (2014) on the history of Germanic and Wolfe (2015a) on the history of Romance to demonstrate the timespan over which V3* orders are attested.

V2 property and the subject system. Movement of the finite verb to the C-domain will necessarily leave a subclass of subjects postverbally within the T-v-layer, and the resulting ‘inversion’ has been viewed as integral to the V2 property since the earliest work on the topic (Den Besten 1983, Platzack 1985, Diesing 1990, Maling 1990, Vikner 1995, Holmberg & Platzack 1995, Bakker 1997). However, outside the best studied Germanic V2 systems it becomes clear that the interaction between V2 and the subject system is variable: in historical Germanic, Celtic, and Romance varieties, V2 is found alongside null subjects, which has a number of formal consequences, as well as the basic empirical consequence that overt postverbal subjects are not as robustly attested. Furthermore, the licensing of so-called Germanic inversion where the subject appears sandwiched between the verb in C⁰ and a constituent demarcating the *v*P-edge is standardly interpreted as being contingent upon the subject raising to Spec-TP (cf. Salvesen & Bech 2014 and Poletto 2014).³ However, Bidese (2008) has shown that Cimbrian – despite showing a V2 grammar since the 17th century – has never licensed Germanic-inversion with nominal subjects (5) (see also Poletto 2019 for discussion on this point). As such, the crosslinguistic data show that while inversion of some kind may be attested across V2 grammars, the interaction between V2 and the subject system is a significant point of variation.

- (5) a. **Gestarn hatt dar Giani gisekk in has*
 Yesterday have.3SG the Giani see.PTCP a hare
 b. *Gestarn dar Giani hat gisekk in has*
 Yesterday the Giani have.3SG see.PTCP a hare
 ‘Yesterday Giani saw a hare’ (Cimbrian)

With this background established, which shows clear variation within V2 grammars, we will now move on to consider how the emerging V2 typology interacts with the existing proposals in the literature for V2 loss.

1.2.2 Previous Approaches to V2 Loss

It is beyond the scope of this article to give a full review of the extant literature on V2 loss. Instead, this section sets out to give an indication of the broad families of analyses which have thus-far been proposed in the literature to account for the loss of V2.

Though early work identified V3, V4, or greater patterns in several V2

³ See also Klævik-Pettersen (2019) for a discussion of inversion cases under which the subject does not leave the *v*P, along with Poletto (2014) for data which confirm the assumption that for Old Italian certain postverbal subjects are genuinely TP-internal.

languages, many accounts of the destabilisation of V2 cite ‘deviant’ V3 as the major factor in its loss. Within Romance, most work on V2 loss has centred on French, and Adams (1987), Vance (1995, 1997), and Roberts (1993) identify that V3 structures emerge in Middle French which were not licensed in the stricter V2 system found in 13th-century Later Old French. For Vance, this falls out from an expansion of CP-adjunction; she notes that ‘[w]hat changes over time is not the type of adjunction but the range of items that may participate in the adjunction, which increases greatly in MidF’ (Vance 1995: 188).⁴ More specifically, considerable emphasis was placed on the status of pronominal subjects in both work on English and French in the first three decades of research in formal diachronic syntax (Zwanenburg 1978, Adams 1987, Van Kemenade 1987, Vance 1995, 1997, Holmberg & Platzack 1995, Hulk & Van Kemenade 1995). In the case of English, Van Kemenade (1987) develops an account where decliticisation of subject pronouns in specific V3 configurations is a destabilising factor for V2; conversely, Adams (1987) develops an account under which cliticisation of subject pronouns destabilises the V2 property. Although in some sense opposed, both of these accounts thus have in common that the ambiguity between an XP-Subject_{Clitic}-Verb and an XP-Subject_{Pronominal}-Verb string contributes to the downstairs reanalysis of V2 towards an SVO grammar with V-to-T/I movement.

- (6) *Forðon we sceolan mid ealle mod and mægene to Gode gecyrran*
 therefore we shall.1PL with all mind and power to God turn.INF
 ‘Therefore we must turn to God with all our mind and power’ (Old English)

(Blickling 97, Hulk & Van Kemenade 1995: 247)

- (7) *Lors il retourna et parla...*
 then he return.3SG.PST and speak.3SG.PST
 ‘Then he returned and spoke...’ (Middle French)

(Saintr  102, 25, Vance 1995: 185)

Both these approaches have, however, been subject to criticism. Lightfoot (1993, 1995), Haerberli (2002), and Walkden (2015) – among others – highlight several issues with the decliticisation hypothesis for English. Lightfoot (1993: 49), for example, notes that reanalysis of subject clitics as pronouns may in fact have reinforced V2 due to integration of XP-Subject-Verb clauses into the V2 schema. However, Walkden (2015: 238) suggests – with others

⁴ There are a number of parallels between Vance’s analysis and that found in Roberts (1993: 149–160): first and foremost, he also couches his analysis of Middle French grammar in terms of the possibility of adjoining fronted complements to CP.

(Allen 1990, Fischer, Van Kemenade, Koopman & Wurff 2000) – that preverbal subject pronouns were not necessarily clitics in Old English and presents detailed argumentation that V3 configurations occur in a far wider variety of contexts than the decliticisation hypothesis would suggest (e.g. (8)).

- (8) *Nu se rica mann ne mæg her habban*
now the rich man NEG can.3SG here have.INF
'Now the rich man cannot here have...' (Old English)

(coalive, +ALS[Ash_Wed]: 110.2758, Walkden 2015: 237)

Parallel arguments against relying on the cliticisation hypothesis for V2-loss in French are put forward by Wolfe (2021b: 278–279). He notes that, as in Old English, V3 is attested in a wider range of environments than with pronominal subjects alone (9) and that – as previously noted by Roberts (1993) – Middle French subject pronouns do not fulfil all standard tests for cliticity. Furthermore, we should note that assuming a clitic status for the subject pronoun in clauses such as (7) so that *il* 'he' does not count for V2, entails us making the entirely ad-hoc assumption that subject pronouns in subject-initial clauses such as (10) are not clitics and thus can satisfy V2; this argumentation appears worryingly circular.

- (9) *L'autre point si est que...*
the-other point si be.3SG that
'The other point is that...' (Middle French)

(Jehpar 24)

- (10) *Je vous congnois bien*
I you.CL know.1SG well
'I know you well' (Middle French)

(Mémoires 13)

Simply highlighting potential inadequacies of the decliticisation and cliticisation hypotheses, however, does not tell us whether there exists a tipping point at which a certain amount of V3 will destabilise a V2 system, or whether specific configurations of preverbal constituents are more destabilising than others.

An additional hypothesis linking the subject-system to the loss of V2 which dates back to early work by Wartburg (1958) and Franzén (1939), claims that the loss of null subjects leads to the specialisation of the preverbal field as a dedicated subject position, thus undermining V2. Under this approach, the decrease in null subjects leads to an increase in V2 clauses with preverbal

subjects; although these clauses would initially have the structure in (11-a), where the preverbal subject is left-peripheral, a sufficient increase in preverbal subjects relative to preverbal non-subjects would be seen as favouring reanalysis towards an SVO grammar with V-to-T movement (11-b).⁵

- (11) a. [_{CP} **Subject** [C **Verb**]]... ⇒
 b. [_{CP} [C] [_{TP} **Subject** [T **Verb**]]]...

While it seems self-evident that language-internal changes leading to an increase in SVO can destabilise V2 (see also Willis 1998: chap. 6; Donaldson 2012: 323; Galves 2020: 377), this hypothesis falls down when we consider that many other Romance languages maintained full null subjects but lost V2 (Fontana 1993, Ledgeway 2009, Poletto 2014, Wolfe 2015a), and that some Germanic varieties are semi-null-subject languages to this day while retaining a full V2 grammar (Biberauer 2010). More promising, as we suggest below, are approaches which link changes in the syntax-information-structure mapping to a decline in XP_{Non-Subject}-V-(S) strings (Van Kemenade 2012, Steiner 2014, Larrivé 2019, Andrade, Aroldo & Galves 2019, Galves 2020), which may include changes in the null- and overt-subject system. A number of proposals linking the loss of V2 to a shift from moved to base-generated topics also predict a rise in SVO and a decline in VS orders (Kroch 1989, Fontana 1993, Vance et al. 2009, Meklenborg 2020a).

Finally, we should note that contact has been invoked by various scholars to account for the loss of V2 in English in particular. One account of the loss of English V2 suggests that dialect contact between a stricter Northern V2 system – influenced by Norse – and a more relaxed Southern one eventually contributed to the decline of the V2 property (Kroch & Taylor 1997, 2000). McWhorter (2002: 240–243) also views the loss of V2 within English as a ‘simplificatory process’ conditioned by contact with Norse. Supporting evidence for the position that dialect and/or language contact can lead to change within a V2 system is assembled by Walkden (2017), who notes that urban vernaculars affected by extensive L2 use of a V2 language, are considerably more permissive of V3 when compared to their standard counterparts.⁶ Despite this evidence, any general account of V2 loss has to contend with the fact that all Medieval Romance varieties – bar the Rhaeto-Romance languages – and several Celtic varieties eventually lose V2, despite the fact that there is no

⁵ See also Jaeggli & Safir (1989) for the incorrect claim that null subjects and V2 are incompatible crosslinguistically and Yang (2000: 116–118) for the proposal that null subjects can destabilise V2.

⁶ See also Haeberli (2007), who suggests that contact between Middle English and French and Anglo-Norman offers a plausible account for non-inversion in certain contexts where it would have been systematic in Old English.

uniform language-contact situation observed across the Romània or in Celtic-speaking Europe.

Taken together, the extant accounts of the loss of V2 either leave questions unanswered for the language in question or fail to account for the full range of data crosslinguistically. While this study does not aim to remedy this lacuna, it does aim to ask whether there are overarching principles of V2-loss which sit alongside language-specific factors.

1.3 *Plan for the Article*

In the remainder of this article, two case-studies of V2-loss are presented with the goal of ascertaining whether common properties can be identified which are characteristic of grammars in the process of losing V2. Our data are drawn from the secondary literature and a recent corpus of Middle French, presented in Section 2, alongside new data from Later Old Venetan, presented in Section 3. Building on these insights, a new proposal for a multifactorial approach to the loss of the V2 property is presented in Section 4 before the article concludes in Section 5.

2 V2 LOSS IN MIDDLE FRENCH

2.1 *State of the Art*

Our brief review of previous approaches to V2-loss in Section 1.2.2 has already shown that consideration of the factors destabilising French V2 is a well-trodden path. However, existing accounts have certain shortcomings: evidence surrounding the alleged cliticisation of subject pronouns (Adams 1987, Hulk & Van Kemenade 1995) is ambiguous at best (Roberts 1993, Vance 1995, 1997, Wolfe 2021b) and while Middle French licenses more surface V3 than Later Old French (Roberts 1993, Vance 1997, Muller 2009, Wolfe 2021a), it does not follow without discussion that this should destabilise the core V2 property when V3 is also widely attested in other V2 systems across many centuries. Looking to the loss of null subjects and the interaction with V2 (Franzén 1939, Wartburg 1958), it is far from obvious that this can be a decisive factor in its loss; looking within France alone, Occitan loses V2 as well, but many Occitan varieties remain full or partial-null-subject languages to this day (Olivieri 2004, Hinzelin & Kaiser 2012, Olivieri & Sauzet 2016). A minimal comparison of Occitan and French is also instructive in evaluating a potential contact-based approach for V2 loss, given that both languages are subject to markedly different language-contact situations throughout the medieval period (see for a detailed review Lodge 1992).

We take as our established point of departure that Middle French, understood here as the language of the 14th and 15th centuries, was a full V2 grammar (Adams 1988, Muller 2005, 2009, Steiner 2014, Wolfe 2021a), but that by the beginning of the 16th century and certainly by 1525 this was no longer the case (Roberts 1993: 166–204; Vance 1995; Wolfe 2021b: 127–128). Adopting a cartographic approach to the left periphery which contrasts with the classic account of V2 sketched in (1), we interpret this to mean that Middle French licensed V-to-Fin movement in all matrix declaratives, but that Renaissance and Classical French did not (12). We return to the issue of the locus of verb movement below, as it may be consequential for V2 loss.

- (12) a. [Frame [Force [Topic [Focus [Fin **XP^{V2}** [Fin **Verb**][TP ... [vP ...]]]]]]]]]
(Middle French)
- b. [Frame [Force [Topic [Focus [Fin [TP **Subject** [T **Verb**] ... [vP ...]]]]]]]]]
(Renaissance French)

The question to answer is therefore the following: why, when V2 had been acquired successfully by children for over a millennium was the property rendered sufficiently unstable so as to be lost in the 16th century?⁷ Our proposal below will be that a careful consideration of the Middle French data provides some potential answers to this important question.

2.2 The Middle French Data – A V2 System in Decline

In this section we will draw on data from the Middle French corpus in Wolfe (2021b,a), made up of 1000 clauses of three texts from the *Base de Français Médiéval*, as well as supporting evidence from additional texts and the secondary literature. As already stated, a starting point for our analysis is that Middle French still features a V2 grammar.⁸

⁷ The dating here is based on the assumption that an innovative Latin grammar exists where uniform V-to-Fin movement is licensed by at least the 4th century AD (Clackson & Horrocks 2007, Ledgeway 2017). An alternative analysis would have it that systematic left-peripheral verb movement is not present in late Latin texts (Danckaert 2017, Klævik-Pettersen 2019) and would thus presumably emerge closer to the advent of the earliest Romance texts (c. 1000AD).

⁸ A variety of analyses have been put forward on this point, which is not the main focus of the present article: Adams (1987), Roberts (1993), and Wolfe (2021b,a) suggest Middle French is a full V2 grammar with V-to-C movement obtaining systematically across matrix declaratives, which is paralleled in Steiner (2014)’s analysis, where the V2 ‘bottleneck’ effects in Middle French are argued to be different to Old French. In keeping with the debate in the 1990s over the locus of the V2 property in a number of languages, Lemieux & Dupuis (1995) suggest Middle French is a V2 grammar, albeit one where IP/TP is the locus of V2. Vance (1995, 1997) instead adopts the idea that Middle French is in a ‘transitional’ state with V-to-C obtaining in some contexts but not others.

Author	Title	Date	BFM Abbreviation
Enguerrant de Monstrelet	<i>Chronique</i>	1441–1444	Monstre
Jean de Paris	<i>Roman</i>	1494	Jehpar
Philippe de Commynes	<i>Memoires (I)</i>	1490–1505	Commyn

Table 1 Middle French Corpus

While the focus of this article is not proving the V2 status of Middle French, the main supporting evidence comes from non-subjects, including objects, occupying the prefield (13), verb-subject inversion (13-a), (13-b), including Germanic inversion (14), and matrix/embedded asymmetries where V2 gives way to SVO in embedded clauses (13-b), (15); these asymmetries can be demonstrated statistically, as shown in Wolfe (2021a: 20).

- (13) a. *ce dit le roy d'Angleterre*
it say.3SG.PST the king of-England
'The Kind of England said it' (Middle French)
(Jehpar 46)
- b. *Aussi desiroit elle fort que son filz fust marié*
also desire.3SG.PST she strongly that her son be.3SG.PST.SBJV
marry.PTCP
'She also strongly desired that her son be married' (Middle French)
(Jehpar 21)
- (14) a. *Si fut ceste conclusion tenue*
SI be.3SG.PST this conclusion keep.PTCP
'This agreement was maintained' (Middle French)
(Chronique 7)
- b. *Et avec telz gens vueil-je avoir...*
and with such people want.1SG-I have.INF
'And with such people, I want to have...' (Middle French)
(Commyn 32)
- (15) *ains respondirent qu'ilz n'en feroient riens*
but respond.3PL.PST that-they NEG-PART.CL do.3PL.COND nothing
'But they responded that they would do nothing' (Middle French)
(Chronique 9)

We now turn to the evidence that the V2 grammar, robustly attested throughout the whole of Medieval French’s history, is breaking down. We will suggest that evidence for this breakdown comes from four areas: (i) the grammatical and information-structural status of constituents in the prefield, (ii) the nature of inversion, (iii) the nature of V3, and (iv) the distribution of the preverbal particle *si*.

Looking first at the prefield, we noted above that a range of constituents can occur before the finite verb, as is expected in a V2 grammar. Nevertheless, the range of constituents which can occur in the prefield is more restricted than in many V2 systems and in earlier varieties of French. Firstly, the proportion of SVO to $XP_{\text{Non-Subject}}-V$ in the two later texts is higher than in a number of other Romance V2 varieties at 47.1% in *Jehpar* and 53.8% in *Mémoires* (cf. Table 2). While there is likely no magic figure at which V2 is destabilised, Lightfoot (1999: 153) has famously proposed that 30% of main clauses must be $XP_{\text{Non-Subject}}-V$ for a child to successfully acquire V2, with subsequent acquisitional studies suggesting that this figure may be overly conservative (Yang 2003, Westergaard 2009a); with appropriate caution given differences in corpora and methodologies, we can, however, note that while all three texts are unambiguously above 30%, the proportion of SVO is rising, as noted by other studies on Middle French (Marchello-Nizia 1980, Vance 1997, Kroch & Santorini 2009, Donaldson 2012, Steiner 2014).

	<i>Chronique</i>	<i>Jehpar</i>	<i>Commyn</i>
SVO	109 (27.0%)	248 (47.1%)	252 (53.8%)
$XP_{\text{Non-Subject}}-V$	295 (73.0%)	278 (52.9%)	216 (46.2%)
(Of which) O-V	49 (12.0%)	20 (3.8%)	35 (7.5%)
Total Count	453 (100%)	526 (100%)	468 (100%)

Table 2 SVO vs. $XP-V$ in the Middle French Corpus

However, noting a potential rise in SVO at the expense of $XP_{\text{Non-Subject}}-V$ does not tell the whole story; on closer inspection the nature of non-subject XPs in initial position is also more restricted than in earlier stages of French and other V2 systems: the vast majority of preverbal subjects and objects are discourse-old,⁹ and when fronted complements are isolated they frequently – though not exclusively (13-a) – include specific markers of anaphoricity such as co-occurring with demonstratives, having a pronominal status, or co-occurring with adjectives that signify that the entity under discussion has previously

⁹ The specific figures given in Wolfe (2021a: 10) are 85.5% discourse-old for *Monstre*, 86.9% for *Jehpar*, and 72.2% for *Commyn*.

been mentioned. This tendency for the prefield to include constituents which are increasingly explicit conveyors of old information has been noted by a number of scholars in the secondary literature ([Marchello-Nizia 1995](#): 99–100; [Rinke & Meisel 2009](#): 112; [Labelle & Hirschbühler 2018](#)).

- (16) a. *De ceste response rirent moult longuement les*
 this response laugh.3PL.PST very long.ADV the English
Anglois
 ‘The English laughed for a long time at this reply’ (Middle French)
 (Jehpar 42-43)
- b. *Ceulx furent prins*
 they be.3PL.PST take.PTCP
 ‘They were taken’ (Middle French)
 (Commyn 13)
- c. *Ledict conte se mist par le Champ pour rallier*
 the-said count REFL.CL put.3SG.PST on the field to rally.INF
gens
 people
 ‘The aforementioned count went on to the field to rally people’
 (Middle French)
 (Commyn 13)

However, a small subset of focal constituents is still able to act as V2-satisfiers as the Medieval French period progresses. These are extremely rare ([Labelle & Hirschbühler 2018](#), [Wolfe 2021a](#)): there is a single new-information object in *Chronique*, none in *Jehpar*, and five in *Commyn*. However, when we assess qualitatively the apparently more permissive system in our latest text, we see that four of the objects feature initial QPs. Crucially, fronted QPs are assumed to target a specific projection within the left-peripheral focus field and are licensed in a range of Modern Romance languages which no longer license widespread focus-fronting ([Ambar 1999](#), [Quer 2002](#), [Leonetti & Escandell-Vidal 2009](#)). An apparent restriction to quantified focal objects therefore, we suggest, instantiates a restriction on the class of constituents which can satisfy V2 in Middle French.

- (17) *Autres en y a qui sont si bons*
 other PARTL.CL LOC.CL have.3SG who be.3PL so good
 ‘There are others who are so good...’ (Middle French)
 (Commyn 27)

To summarise our discussion, while Middle French is still a V2 grammar, its prefield shows three distinctions when compared to earlier stages of French and some other V2 systems: the proportion of initial subjects is increasing relative to non-subjects, preverbal and non-subjects show a strong tendency towards being explicitly discourse-old with morphosyntactic indicators of anaphoricity, and the focus field is increasingly restricted; it rarely hosts informationally or contrastively focused constituents but can still host QPs. Of course, these are not independent developments but go hand-in-hand: it is a long-established intuition that subjects are more likely to be thematic or topical than non-subjects (Chafe 1976, Givón 1983, Lambrecht 1994, Rizzi 2005) so increasing restrictions on the range of focus constituents which can satisfy V2 are likely to favour initial subjects.

We noted in Section 1.2.1 that inversion is a classic correlate of V2, with clauses featuring inversion given a particular prominence in acquisitional accounts of the triggering of V2 (Lightfoot 1991, 1995, 1999, Poeppel & Wexler 1993, Yang 2000, Westergaard 2009b). When we look at the Middle French inversion rates as a whole, before controlling for the position of the subject or its pragmatic status, the rates have either been reported to show a modest decrease Wolfe (2021a: 6) or broad continuity (Vance 1995: 185, Vance 1997: 257; Muller 2009: 246).¹⁰ However, alongside observations that the proportion of Germanic inversion decreases in the Middle French period (Vance 1997, Wolfe 2021b,a), certain qualitative differences in the nature of inversion are also identifiable which may be significant from the point of view of V2 loss.¹¹ Germanic inversion, which likely provides the acquirer with some of the most unambiguous evidence of V-to-Fin movement becomes increasingly specialised in Middle French to occur only with subjects which have already been mentioned in the preceding portion of text and/or are pronominal, as in (18).

- (18) *Encores n'avez vous riens ouy*
 still NEG-have.2PL you nothing hear.PTCP
 'You've still heard nothing' (Middle French)

(Jehpar 47)

This increasing specialisation stands in contrast to subjects in Romance-inversion

¹⁰ As pointed out by a reviewer, analysis of inversion-rates across larger corpora will likely show an even more varied picture; this makes controlling for text-type in corpora even more significant.

¹¹ The data underpinning these observations are found in Wolfe (2021b); note that early observations on the syntax-information structure mapping regarding subject positions in Medieval French is also found in Vance (1997).

contexts, which can belong to a range of discourse-pragmatic values, where both new- (19-a) and old-information subjects (19-b) can co-occur in the same text:

- (19) a. *et ja estoit commencée une grosse et forte*
and already be.3SG.PST begin.PTCP a great and violent
escarmouche ...
skirmish
'And a great violent skirmish had already begun...' (Middle French)
(Commyn 11)
- b. *Et ces parolles m'a compté le roy*
and these remarks me.CL=have.3SG recount.PTCP the king
'And the King made these remarks to me' (Middle French)
(Commyn 9)

This shift in the syntax-information mapping is potentially significant: while Germanic inversion, which is increasingly restricted to occurring with pronominal subjects and a restricted subclass of nominals, provides unambiguous evidence of V-to-Fin movement and thus V2, Romance-inversion, which can be licensed with a wide range of subjects, is string ambiguous between a V2 grammar with V-to-Fin movement and an SVO grammar with V-to-T movement, the latter of which emerges within a hundred years of our last text.¹²

- (20) a. [_{Fin} XP^{V2} [_{Fin} Verb][_{TP} Subject [_{VP} ...]]] (Germanic Inversion)
b. [_{Fin} XP^{V2} [_{Fin} Verb][_{TP} [_{VP} Subject ...]]] (Romance Inversion in a V2 Grammar)
c. [_{CP} XP [_{TP} [T Verb] [_{VP} Subject ...]]] (Romance Inversion in an SVO Grammar)

The data on V3 in Middle French, as we have already seen, are considered significant for V2-loss by a number of scholars. Examination of our corpus, alongside patterns reported for other texts in the secondary literature, confirms that V3* orders are qualitatively less restricted than in Old French.¹³ Specifically, not all V3 orders involve a frame-setting adverbial or clause, as the examples in (21) show and may involve multiple argument fronting as in (21-b):

¹² I use the generic label 'CP' here to indicate that multiple reanalyses would be possible where the XP sat in the Frame, Topic, or Focus field depending on its grammatical or pragmatic properties.

¹³ Quantitatively, V3 or greater orders constitute 10.6% of the matrix corpus in *Monstre* (n=13), 4.0% of the corpus in *Jehpar* (n=7), and 8.6% of the corpus in *Commyn* (n=13). For fuller discussion of verb position see Wolfe (2021a: 15–17).

- (21) a. *L'autre point si est que*
 the-other point si be.3sg that
 'The other point is that...' (Middle French)
 (Jehpar 24)
- b. *Duquel lieu de Saint-Quentin elle s'en vint*
 of-the place of Saint-Quentin she REFL.CL=LOC.CL come.3sg.PST
lendemain disner
 the-following-day dine.INF
 'She came to dine the following day from Saint Quentin' (Middle French)
 (Monstre 2)

Could these orders have undermined evidence for the V2 property? The emerging typology of stable V2 systems which tolerate V3* orders suggests that in their own right such orders are not incompatible with acquisition and maintenance of the V2 property. Indeed, the licensing of such orders across early Indo-European may fall out naturally if Proto-Indo-European is reconstructed as having an articulated left-peripheral structure (Roberts 2012, 2021), with various sub-branches of the Indo-European family subsequently innovating V-to-C movement (Eythorsson 1995, Walkden 2014, Wolfe 2016a, Mee-len 2016, Ledgeway 2017). Crucially, however, compatibility between V2 and orders such as (21-a), (21-b) being licit relies on the acquirer receiving sufficient evidence of V-to-C movement, an articulated left-peripheral structure, and generalised XP-fronting, which favours the acquirer's reanalysis (22-a) over (22-b):

- (22) a. [_{Topic} **XP**¹ [_{Focus} **XP**₂ [_{Fin} [_{Fin} **Verb**]]][_{TP} ... [_{vP}...]]] (V2 Grammar)
- b. [_{Topic} **XP**¹ [_{Focus} [_{Fin} [_{Fin}]]][_{TP} **Subject** [_T **Verb**] [_{vP} ...]]] (SVO Grammar)

We have already seen, however, that evidence for these three properties may have been undermined by changes in other components of the grammar: changes in the inversion system noted above serve to obscure some of the evidence for V-to-C movement, while increasing restrictions on the nature of constituents occurring in the prefield serve to undermine evidence for generalised movement of XPs to the left periphery; a decline in focus-fronting may have been especially significant here given such constituents are unambiguously moved to their left-peripheral position (Rizzi 1997, Frascarelli 2000, Benincà 2004). We return to these issues below but note for now that liberal V3 of the type we find in Middle French may have destabilised V2 only because it was found

in combination with certain other features of the grammar.¹⁴

Finally, we turn to the particle *si*. This hugely controversial particle, which has been the subject of a huge number of studies (Marchello-Nizia 1985, Fleischman 1991, 1992, Reenen & Schøsler 2000, Ferraresi & Goldbach 2002, Ledgeway 2008, Salvesen 2013, Wolfe 2018b, Meklenborg 2020b), is ubiquitous in Old French texts and is still found in the Middle French period. Although there is evidence in earlier stages of French that *si* may have functioned as a topic-continuity marker, its distribution from early 13th-century prose onwards suggests it should be viewed as a purely formal expletive which satisfies V2 in Later Old French and Middle French (Ferraresi & Goldbach 2002, Salvesen 2013, Wolfe 2020a).

- (23) a. *Si y alèrent tantost...*
si LOC.CL go.3PL.PST as-soon-as
 ‘They went there as soon as they could’ (Middle French)
 (Monstre 8)
- b. *Si me suis pencee que plus beau mariage ne*
si me.CL be.1SG think.PTCP that more beautiful marriage NEG
pourroit trouver
can.3SG.COND find.INF
 ‘I have thought to myself that he could not find a more beautiful marriage’ (Middle French)
 (Jehpar 22)
- c. *Et quant elles virent venir le conte sans luy, si*
and when they see.3PL.PST come.INF the count without him si
furent moult desconfortees et marries
be.3PL.PST very concerned and distressed
 ‘And when they saw the Count return without him, they were very concerned and distressed’ (Middle French)
 (Jehpar 69)

A significant generalisation regarding its distribution is that it rarely co-occurs with fronted arguments such as in (24) from the Early Old French period onwards, and seemingly never co-occurs with focal subjects or objects after approximately 1180 (Wolfe 2018b);¹⁵ we saw above this class of constituent

¹⁴ For detailed discussion of where Old and Middle French sit on the Fin/Force-V2 typology which plays a key role in constraining V3 in V2 grammars (e.g. Haegeman & Greco 2018), see Ledgeway (2021), Wolfe (2021b,a), and Shaw (in preparation).

¹⁵ In Wolfe (2018b)’s analysis it is claimed that *si* has not yet assumed a true expletive function in Early Old French, which may account for why a direct-object XP can co-occur with it in the left periphery. While, as the discussion here shows, Subject + *si* orders are found in Middle

is especially significant as it is unambiguously moved, so clear evidence for an active V2 constraint attracting constituents from the clausal core to the left periphery.

- (24) *Reis Vivien si succuras en Imphe*
 King Vivien si help.2SG.FUT in Imphe
 ‘You will help King Vivien in Imphe’ (Old French)

(Roland 3995-3996)

Our proposal, therefore, is that despite *si* being intimately connected with French’s V2 syntax, changes in its distribution may also have contributed to its loss: the incompatibility between *si* and fronted arguments, especially focal arguments, serves to undermine evidence for argument-fronting in general and focus-fronting in particular. Furthermore, we should note that *si* most regularly occurs in complementary distribution with an overt postverbal subject (Marchello-Nizia 1985: 164–166; Fleischman 1991: 258; Buridant 2000: sec. 411); as such, it also serves to undermine evidence for V-to-C movement in the form of inversion. To summarise, *si*’s properties in Middle French have the potential to destabilise both the core components of the V2 constraint, namely XP-fronting and V-to-C movement.

To conclude this overview of the Middle French data, we have suggested that multiple factors are apparent which had the potential to destabilise V2. Crucially, none of these in isolation seems a plausible trigger for the loss of V2 given that each of the features identified is – to a greater or lesser extent – an attested feature of otherwise stable V2 systems. The features identified are as follows:

- i. **The prefield**; the relative proportion of SVO increases throughout the Middle French period; concomitantly, the possibility to license left-peripheral foci declines and fronted objects increasingly encode unambiguously discourse-old information.
- ii. **The subject system**; while the overall proportion of inverted subjects remains comparable to Old French, Germanic-inversion appears increasing specialised and is licensed in contexts where the subject is pronominal or already active in the preceding portion of text. Potentially ambiguous Romance-inversion structures are, however, licensed in a broad range of information-structural contexts.
- iii. **V3 orders**; Middle French is notably more permissive of V3 structures than Later Old French and V3 or greater orders are not restricted to co-

French, co-occurrence with objects is typically not found in the Middle French period.

occurring with an initial frame-setter. While this kind of V3 does not destabilise V2 alone, we suggested that alongside properties (i) and (ii), an SVO analysis of strings where multiple XPs co-occur before the finite verb may be considered more likely by the acquirer.

- iv. **Particle** *si*; *si* shows particular distributional patterns in Middle French which may have served to undermine V2: its incompatibility with argument-fronting and initial foci undermines evidence for generalised XP-fronting to the left-periphery and its tendency to occur without an overt postverbal subject undermines evidence for V-to-C movement.

We will now consider possible confirmatory parallels in the understudied data from Later Old Venetan before returning to an overall theory of V2 loss in Section 4.

3 V2 LOSS IN LATER OLD VENETAN

3.1 *State of the Art*

We noted above that V2-loss in Old and Middle French has been an area of interest within formal historical syntax since at least the late 1980s. By contrast, the loss of V2 in Old Venetan, with the single exception of Singh (2021), has not previously been considered. In fact, the 14th-century Old Venetan text – *Lio Mazor* – was one of the first Medieval Romance texts to be analysed from a formal perspective in Benincà (1983a), which in turn led to a detailed exposition of the V2 hypothesis in further work (Benincà 1983b, 1995, 2004, 2006, 2013). Nevertheless, there are reasons why examining V2-loss in Old Venetan and the Venetan varieties in general is not directly comparable to the task for Old and Middle French: almost all formal diachronic studies have focussed on the grammar of *Lio Mazor* alone (Vanelli 1987, Benincà 1995, Poletto 1995, Wolfe 2016a, 2018c), and while a digitised corpus of Old Venetan texts is under construction, it is not yet available.¹⁶ Nevertheless, we will suggest in the analysis that follows that expanding our database to other 14th-century texts yields insights into late-stage V2 grammars which parallel in many ways our more established findings for Middle French.

3.2 *The Old Venetan Data – A V2 System in Decline*

Our findings here come from manually tagged samples of five texts, which are chosen to represent three major dialect areas of the Veneto, namely Padua, Verona and Venice. Details of each text are given in Table 3.

¹⁶ See ??TOCHECKGarzonio (forthcoming)??TOCHECK.

Title	Date	Region	Abbreviation
<i>Testi Padovani del trecento</i>	1336-1380	Padua	Tomasin
<i>El libro agregà de Serapiom</i>	1390	Padua	Serapiom
<i>Lio Mazor</i>	1312	Venice	Lio Mazor
<i>Libro de miser Tristan</i>	14 th century	Venice	Tristano
<i>Leggenda di Santa Caterina</i>	14 th century	Verona	Santa Caterina

Table 3 Old Venetan Corpus

From the outset, we should note that – as with Old and Middle French – there is a consensus view in the literature that Old Venetan varieties had V2 grammars (Benincà 1983a, 2004, Wolfe 2018c: chap. 5, Poletto 2020, Garzonio 2021, Singh 2021, Poletto & Wolfe forthcoming). As with other V2 languages, the main evidence comes from the non-specialised nature of the prefield (25)–(26), verb-subject Germanic and Romance inversion (26), and major clause-type asymmetries, with SVO the overwhelmingly dominant word-order pattern in embedded clauses (27).

- (25) *Gran fo lo planto e lo dolor*
 reat be.3SG.PST the pain and the grief
 ‘The pain and the grief was great’ (Old Venetan)
 (Tristano 77)
- (26) *Questo avrò-e’*
 this have.1SG.FUT=I
 ‘I’ll have this’ (Old Venetan)
 (Lio Mazor 45)
- (27) *lo qual dis che Madalena li dava II*
 the which say.3SG.PST that Madalena him.CL give.3SG.PST two
 ‘which said that Madalena gave him two’ (Old Venetan)
 (Lio Mazor 38)

Closer examination of the prefield, however, reveals a picture in some texts which is strikingly similar to Middle French. Firstly, looking at Table 4, we see that $X_{\text{Non-Subject}}\text{-V}$ orders are as low in comparison to other Medieval Romance

varieties,¹⁷ with object-fronting especially marginal in certain texts:

	<i>Tomasin</i>	<i>Serapiom</i>	<i>Tristano</i>	<i>Lio Mazor</i>	<i>Santa Caterina</i>
SVO	39 (40.2%)	189 (63.0%)	174 (58.0%)	281 (74.3%)	165 (58.1%)
XP _{Non-Subject} -V	58 (59.8%)	111 (37.0%)	125 (42.0%)	97 (25.7%)	119 (41.9%)
(Of which) O-V	2 (2.1%)	7 (2.3%)	12 (4.0%)	35 (9.3%)	33 (11.6%)
Total Count	97 (100%)	300 (100%)	300 (100%)	378 (100%)	284 (100%)

Table 4 SVO vs. XP-V in the Old Venetan Corpus

Turning to qualitative observations, we find no compelling evidence that Old Venetan V2 grammars licensed generalised left-peripheral focus. Only two examples of contrastive focus are found in *Lio Mazor* (28) and only two types of focal constituents are robustly attested in initial position in the other texts: QPs, as in Middle French (29), and predicative complements, as in (30):

- (28) *A t' acusarò*
to you accuse.1SG.fut
'You'll give this to me' (Old Venetan)
(Lio Mazor 50)
- (29) a. *E tuto questo li ha fato una damisela*
and all this him.CL have.3SG do.PTCP a woman
'And a woman did all this to him' (Old Venetan)
(Tristano 20)
- b. *E tanta virtù me dai k'e possa portare*
and such virtue me.CL give.2SG that=I can.1SG.SBJV bring.INF
'And you give me such virtue that I can bring...' (Old Veronese)
(Santa Caterina 1054)
- (30) *Fijola fo d'un re che Costo fi clamà*
daughter be.3SG.PST of-a king that Costo REFL.CL call.PTCP
'She was daughter of a king called Costo' (Old Veronese)

¹⁷ In Wolfe (2018c: 25) five Medieval Romance varieties are compared in addition to Venetian (French, Occitan, Sicilian, Spanish, and Sardinian); the percentage of XP_{Non-Subject}-V V2 clauses ranges from 37.4% to 76.22% and the, specific percentage of Object-V V2 clauses range from 25.0% to 6.42%.

(31) a. *Ma questo te digo ben*
but this you.CL tell.1SG as-well
'But I'll tell you this as well' (Old Veronese)

b. *et a questo non devé vui aver resguardo*
and to this NEG must.2PL you have.INF regard
'And you mustn't pay attention to this' (Old Venetian)

Turning to inversion, the lack of a large-scale digitised corpus of Old Venetan means we do not have quantitative data for the full range of extant texts comparable to those we drew upon for the analysis of Middle French.¹⁸ Nevertheless, we observe that Germanic inversion is seemingly rarer in Old Venetan than in other Romance V2 systems. *Lio Mazor*, for example, evidences both Germanic (32-a) and Romance inversion (32-b), but in the 1000-clause sample analysed in Wolfe (2018c: chap. 3), only three subjects occur in a Germanic-inversion configuration. As representative of Paduan, not a single example of Germanic-inversion was found in a hand-search of *Tomasin*, and neither were cases found in *Santa Caterina*, despite it featuring postverbal subjects such as (33), the positions of which are ambiguous.¹⁹

22

- (32) a. *e così er' e' rivà a casa de Macho de Robin*
 and thus be.1SG.PST I arrive.PTCP at house of Macho de Robin
 'And I thus arrived at the house of Macho de Robin' (Old Venetian)

(Lio Mazor 22)

- b. *fo trovà i(n) la taverna del Ros Tomi Dervasi*
 be.3SG.PST find.PTCP in th tavern of-the Ros Tomi Dervasi
 'And Tomi Dervasi was found in the Ros's tavern' (Old Venetian)

(Lio Mazor 33)

- (33) *Con dis lo filosofo...*
 So say.3SG.PST the philosopher
 'So the philosopher said...' (Old Veronese)

(Santa Caterina 699)

Support for the conclusion that Germanic inversion was rare or absent in Old Venetan comes from a recent study of an Old Venetian text, the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, by Singh, who concludes that 'cases of Germanic inversion of the type: constituent-auxiliary-subject were notably absent within this text in compound tenses and restructuring environments, whereby these subjects almost always occur preverbally' Singh (2021: 13). While – as we have noted several times in this study – assuming a strict parallelism between extant textual evidence and child-directed speech is a problematic methodological assumption, the textual evidence suggests that a key indicator of V-to-C movement was not well represented in the late-stage Old Venetan V2 syntax and we might therefore infer that it would also not be well represented in the Primary Linguistic Data.

We now consider V3 orders, which have not previously been discussed in the context of V2 loss for Venetan but have figured extensively in the discussion of V2-loss in French. Previous work on *Lio Mazor* has identified a relatively strict V2 grammar (Wolfe 2016a; Wolfe 2018c: chap. 3), where V4 is not generally found and V3 is restricted to occurring with initial frame-setters, as in (34). Does this generalisation extend beyond *Lio Mazor*?

- (34) (E) *sì stando, lo dito Peleg(r)in levà 1 stiçun*
 and thus be.PROG the said Pelegrin raise.3SG.PST one dagger

here is that the eventual restrictions on Germanic inversion are the culmination of ongoing information-structural specialisation of the TP-internal position to which such subjects raise. Viewed under this lens, while total loss of Germanic inversion may – in most V2 systems – be a surface reflex of the loss of V2, the reduction in the contexts where Germanic inversion is licensed will also contribute to the destabilising of the V2 property.

‘And like this, the said Pelegrin lifted up a dagger’ (Old Venetian)

(Lio Mazor 53)

In fact, it becomes apparent that *Lio Mazor* is itself an exception; in the four other texts examined V3 is more permissive and such clauses are not uniformly frame-setter initial (35). Furthermore, V4 is found in all the texts except *Lio Mazor* and *Serapiom* (36).

- (35) a. *Ella sempre tene un so fijolo in braço*
 she always hold.3SG.PST a her child in arm
 ‘She always holds her child in her arms’ (Old Veronese)
 (Santa Caterina 36)
- b. *[L]o prevede sì dis:*
 the priest sì say.3SG.PST
 ‘The priest said:’ (Old Veronese)

(Santa Caterina 196)

- (36) *Tristan, lo qual era in palazo, quando elo vete che tuti*
 Tristan the which be.3SG.PST in palace when he see.3SG.PST that all
demenava gran duol, ello comença a domendar che questo
 bear.3SG.PST great pain he begin.3SG.PST to ask.INF what this
era
 be.3SG.PST
 ‘Tristan, who was in the palace when he saw that everyone was experiencing great sorrow, began to ask what this was’ (Old Venetian)

(Tristano 75)

As noted for Middle French, V3 or greater structures such as these can be a stable component of V2 grammars but nevertheless may serve to undermine V2 if evidence is lacking elsewhere for V-to-C movement and XP-fronting. Thus, while in the conservative V2 grammar a clause like (35-a) would feature two left-peripheral constituents before the finite verb in Fin, it could plausibly be reanalysed as featuring a clause-internal subject followed by a in-situ temporal adverbial (Cinque 1999). The potential for clauses with multiple XPs before the finite verb to destabilise V2 is reinforced further if we consider the distribution of the particle *sì*.

Recall that in Middle French, *sì* is near-incompatible with fronted arguments. This stands in stark contrast to the situation we find in all the Old Venetan texts except *Lio Mazor* where *sì* is found with initial subjects; in *Stussi*

- Why the merger of *si* is required in the grammar when subjects can otherwise satisfy V2 remains puzzling. A possible hypothesis, parallel to one put forward for different classes of initial clauses in Old and Middle French (Vance et al. 2009, Donaldson 2012) would be to suggest that Old Venetan preverbal subjects could reach the left periphery via movement and satisfy V2, or via base-generation higher in the left periphery, where merger of *si* would be required. If this hypothesis were correct – and it raises a number of technical issues beyond the scope of this article – the inability for many initial subjects to satisfy V2 could feasibly serve to destabilise the property and, as we have seen elsewhere, decrease the available evidence of generalised argument fronting to the C-domain.

Due to the paucity of secondary literature and lack of a digitised corpus, our discussion of Old Venetan has not been as comprehensive as that for Middle French. Nevertheless, we have observed several properties of the grammar which could destabilise V2 and, in many respects parallel properties seen in the late-stage V2 grammar of Middle French:

- i. **The prefixfield;** the proportion of SVO appears high relative to other Romance varieties in certain texts, while focus-fronting is highly specialized, occurring with QPs and predicative complements. Moreover, fronted objects are highly restricted and when they do occur, they have an anaphoric quality.

20 See also [Donaldson \(2015\)](#) for this pattern of Subject + *si* in Old Occitan.

- ii. **The subject system**; inversion in general appears rare in the Venetan texts, though this needs to be corroborated in a large-scale quantitative study. Significantly, the number of cases of Germanic-inversion is marginal.
- iii. **V3 orders**; while *Lio Mazor* presents a relatively strict V2 system, the other texts examined allow multiple argument fronting and, in certain cases, V4 orders.
- iv. **Particle *si***; *si* occurs with fronted arguments in all texts except *Lio Mazor* and shows near-systematic co-occurrence with initial subjects in certain texts. As suggested above, this particular distribution may lead acquirers towards a reanalysis of the data where XPs are not systematically moved to the left periphery but are instead optionally base-generated there, which would favour an eventual SVO grammar.

In the discussion that follows we will consider these findings alongside those for Middle French to put forward a new account of V2 loss.

4 A CONSPIRACY OF FACTORS

Having considered a range of data from Middle French and Old Venetan, we can now outline the common characteristics of late-stage V2 systems, which we have seen pattern alike in several respects.

Firstly, while these grammars permit a range of constituents to occupy the left-peripheral preverbal field, they show notable restrictions on the pragmatic values of these constituents. Neither Middle French nor Later Old Venetan can be described as having a fully active focus field, with both sets of grammars permitting only a subclass of foci to satisfy V2. Similar observations apply to the topic field, where only strictly anaphoric objects appear able to move to the left periphery. Both grammars therefore instantiate a ‘bridge’ between the traditional class of full V2 grammars, where an expansive range of constituents are obligatorily moved to the C-domain, and residual V2 grammars, where a restricted class optionally move, in that a restricted class of constituents obligatorily move:

	Full V2	Late-Stage V2	Residual V2
(38)	Obligatory XP Mov	Obligatory XP Mov	Optional XP Mov
	Wide Class XPs	Restricted Class XPs	Restricted Class XPs

Crosslinguistically, similar observations apply to a range of languages which remain V2 but that we know through corpus evidence lose it within a century or two; [Galves \(2020\)](#) discusses increasing restrictions on the nature

of topics and foci in Classical Portuguese, [Ledgeway \(2009: chap.21\)](#) suggests that focus-fronting becomes increasingly restricted in the history of Old Neapolitan, several scholars have identified increasing restrictions on constituents occurring in the Middle English prefield ([Warner 2007](#), [Van Kemenade & Westergaard 2012](#)), and [Willis \(2007: 295\)](#) charts similar restrictions on Middle Welsh, noting that ‘topicalization of constituents other than subjects and adverbs became less frequent’. Crucially, under the assumption that acquirers will be biased towards featurally simpler grammars ([Roberts 2012](#), [Van Gelderen 2009, 2015](#), [Roberts 2021](#)), we should note that a classic V2 grammar where all XPs can satisfy V2 as a result of a generalised movement diacritic (e.g. +EF) is predicted to be more stable than a late-stage V2 grammar, of the type discussed here, where the triggering features are necessarily more complex, making reference to subtypes of topic or focus (e.g. +Q).²¹

Secondly, and linked to these restrictions, we see an increasing preference in late-stage V2 grammars for constituents to be base-generated in the left periphery rather than moved there. The first piece of evidence for this comes from the simple decline of focus-fronting in favour of topicalisation (also noted by [Steiner 2014](#) and [Labelle & Hirschbühler 2018](#) among others), if we follow the standard assumption that foci are always moved ([Rizzi 1997](#), [Benincà 2001](#), [Frascarelli 2000](#)); taking a sub-class of topics to be base-generated in the left periphery, this basic generalisation itself points to less movement, as we are observing more topics and fewer foci preverbally. However, there are also several other indicators of this shift: the particle *sì*, itself base-generated in the left periphery to satisfy V2 is used extensively in Middle French and several of Old Venetan texts; in the case of Old Venetan, [Garzonio \(2021\)](#) also presents detailed evidence that another expletive – *ello* – is widely used which is base-generated in the left periphery (39).

- (39) *Ello sì à mestier ch’io lo vada a çerchar*
 it so has necessity that-I him go to search
 ‘It is necessary that I go to search for him’ (Old Venetan)

(Zibaldone da Canal, [Garzonio 2021: 66](#))

Finally, as has been established since [Priestley \(1955\)](#) and, later, [Kroch \(1989, 2001\)](#) left-dislocation rises in frequency throughout the history of Medieval French and can be modelled as being in direct competition with movement-

²¹ Note that the proposal here is therefore a halfway-house between classic approaches to V2 and the micro-cue approach pursued by [Westergaard \(2008, 2009b,a\)](#); our suggestion is that in stable V2 systems a single feature (e.g. +EF) is present on a C-related head and can attract a maximally general class of XPs, but that in late-stage V2 grammars, the probing features of topic and focus heads in the C-domain will be more specialised.

based topicalisation without clitic resumption. Assuming left-dislocation to be derived via base-generation (Cinque 1990, Benincà & Poletto 2004), this is therefore a straightforward case of V2-reinforcing strings (40-a) being directly replaced by strings compatible with a V2 or SVO analysis (40-b).

- (40) a. *Semblables bends et aussi grosses armées avoient*
 similar bands and so great armies have.3PL.PST
monsr de Ravastin
 monsieur de Ravastin
 ‘Monsieur Ravastin had similar bands and such great armies’
 (Middle French)
- (Commyn 6)
- b. *Et le premier homme qui morut, ce fut luy et*
 and the first man who die.3SG.PST that be.3SG.PST him and
ses gens
 his men
 ‘And the first man that died, that was him and his men’ (Middle French)
- (Commyn 9)

We have also noted that all our late-stage V2 grammars – with the exception of the *Lio Mazor* text, which is overall more conservative – feature extensive V3 and multiple-argument fronting. In fact, when we look beyond Old Venetan and Middle French, we note that late-stage grammars elsewhere appear to be permissive of V3 and in formal terms are likely Fin-V2 grammars, with a low locus of verb movement.²² Somewhat paradoxically, however, the Southern and Central Italo-Romance languages, some Ibero-Romance varieties, and Old Occitan license extensive V3 in their earliest textual attestations yet do not lose V2 for over half a millennium (Fontana 1993, Ribeiro 1995, Ledge-way 2008, Poletto 2014, Wolfe 2018a, Galves 2020). This would point to the conclusion that certain V3 strings can undermine V2, but only do so when evidence for verb and XP-movement to the C-domain is insufficiently robust elsewhere in the Primary Linguistic Data. In concrete terms, a hypothesis to test in future research would be that no strict Force-V2 system will lose V2 directly but will only do so after passing through a Fin-V2 stage.

Finally, we see evidence in both Old Venetan and Middle French of changes

²² On the Fin/Force-V2 typology crosslinguistically, see Poletto (2002), Wolfe (2016b, 2019), and Haegeman & Greco (2018) in particular. The basic generalisation cutting across these works is that a low locus of V2 in Fin will a priori permit a greater range of constituents to lexicalise the functional projections higher than the finite verb, thus yielding a descriptively more ‘relaxed’ V2 grammar.

which impact inversion in the period under discussion: in the case of Venetan, inversion in general is rare and Germanic inversion even more so, whereas in French inversion does not decrease markedly until the very end of the Middle French period, but Germanic inversion sees increasing restrictions on its distribution. Importantly, in the case of French, this is due to qualitative changes in the syntax-information structure mapping regarding subject positions which occur semi-independently from the V2 property (Salvesen & Bech 2014, Wolfe 2020b); we therefore maintain the intuition that inversion is acquisitionally important (Poeppel & Wexler 1993, Lightfoot 1995, Westergaard 2009b), but avoid the circular argumentation that the V2 grammar is destabilised due to fewer XP-V strings being produced by the V2 grammar itself.

Considering as a whole this empirical picture from the two corpora along with the secondary literature reviewed in Section 1 and throughout the article, it becomes obvious that any search for a single decisive factor ‘triggering’ V2 loss is in vain, supporting the overall conclusion of Poletto (2019). Rather, what we observe is a conspiracy of factors, which come together to destabilise a V2 grammar; these factors are found in multiple sub-components of the grammar and will vary crosslinguistically.²³ However, we suggest here that they all have in common that they are the inverse of the contributing factors to the emergence of V2.

Considering the emergence of V2, two factors are argued to be decisive in work on Germanic (Hinterhölzl & Petrova 2009, Walkden 2014), Celtic (Mee-len 2020), and Romance (Salvi 2004, Wolfe 2016a, Ledgeway 2017), namely that discourse- or syntactically marked XP-fronting to the C-domain and discourse or syntactically marked verb movement to the C-domain are reanalysed as systematic. What we observe in the reanalysis of a late-stage V2 grammar of the type discussed here, to a residual V2 grammar of the kind found in Modern English and Modern Romance (Rizzi 1996, Sailor 2020, Wolfe 2022a, Cruschina & Sailor 2022), is the inverse of this reanalysis, where unmarked syntactic operations are reanalysed as marked. Crucially, specialisation of the discourse-pragmatic value of constituents in the prefield along with a general tendency towards base-generation rather than movement undermines evidence of generalised XP-fronting, while a higher proportion of SVO, decrease or specialisation in inversion, and an increase in certain types of V3 undermines evidence for generalised left-peripheral verb movement (Table 5).

²³ By suggesting that contributing factors for V2 loss can be found in multiple, seemingly loosely related, areas of the grammar, our proposal therefore mirrors Weerman (1989)’s V2 Conspiracy for acquisition and maintenance of a V2 system.

Generalised XP-Fronting	Generalised V-Movement
Prefield Specialisation	Increase in SVO
Increase in Base-Generation	Inversion Specialisation
	Expansion of V3

Table 5 Destabilising a V2 Grammar

5 CONCLUSION

Overall, our discussion has suggested that the search for a single trigger for V2 loss is ultimately a fruitless one; this becomes apparent when we consider the two late-stage grammars considered here in isolation and is reinforced upon close evaluation of the existing literature (cf. Section 2). The core contention here is that multiple factors must conspire together for the V2 property – stable historically or synchronically in dozens of languages – to be undermined. Importantly, the discussion above has shown that two of the classic features invoked on their own for V2 loss in classic work, namely inversion (Lightfoot 1989, 1993, 1995) and V3 orders (Van Kemenade 1987, Vance 1995) can contribute to the destabilisation of a V2 grammar but do not do so in isolation. Furthermore, this study has contributed to the growing consensus that information structure has a major role to play in conditioning the outcomes of syntactic change. The fundamental prediction of the proposal crosslinguistically is that factors destabilising V2 beyond the languages discussed here all serve to undermine evidence of either generalised XP-fronting or verb movement to the left periphery.

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