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Verb-initial Sentences in the Development of Swedish

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss Swedish word order, specifically verb initial clauses (V/I), from the perspective of language development. The paper is organized as follows. First, a short description of Swedish word order is made. The syntactic properties will be discussed from a synchronic as well as a diachronic perspective. Second, earlier studies of the acquisition of Swedish will be reviewed and results from new data on first and second language acquisition of Swedish will be presented. Third, the implication of the empirical findings will be discussed and related to issues of historical change.

2. Swedish syntax

Swedish belongs to a group of languages usually described as V/2 (verb-second) languages. In V/2 languages subject-verb inversion is obligatory in topicalized declarative main clauses, i.e. whenever an adverbial or object occurs in sentence initial position, the verb-second constraint prescribes that the inflected verb comes in the second position (*Han kom igår* 'He came yesterday', *Igår kom han* 'Yesterday came he'). Interrogatives typically exhibit inverted word order, and this is in fact what syntactically differentiates yes-/no-questions from statements. Furthermore, in many V/2 languages there is a differentiation between main clause and subordinate clause word order, which implies that the V/2 constraint only works in main clauses. For example, in Swedish subordinate clauses, subject-verb inversion is not admitted, but the subject always precedes the verb. Swedish word order rules are described in generative terms by assuming verb movement to the C position in main clauses. In subordinate clauses this movement is blocked by the complementizer (Platzack & Holmberg 1989).

2.1. V/1 clauses.

Despite the fact that V/2 languages are characterized by having the inflected verb in the second position in declaratives, the possibility of V/1 declaratives exists in several V/2 languages. The most well-known examples are Icelandic and Yiddish (cf. C. Platzack 1987). In modern Swedish and German, however, V/1 clauses are generally assumed to be non-existent (cf. Holm 1967), although it is admitted that they were quite frequent in both Old Scandinavian and Old High German. Interestingly, it has recently been claimed that V/1 clauses do occur in modern spoken varieties of Swedish (Dahlbäck & Vamling 1983) and also in modern spoken German (Önnerfors 1993, *forthc*).

In an analysis of Swedish word order from a diachronic perspective, Falk 1993 suggests a model in which verb-initial clauses (V/1) as well as V/2 constructions are taken into consideration. Falk defines three types of V/1 clauses: 'topic-drop', 'det-less clauses' and 'definite subject inversion'. The different types will be discussed and exemplified below.

Topic-drop. Topic-drop clauses are elliptical clauses where the topicalized element may be omitted if it can be inferred from the context. This clause type is common in colloquial Swedish as in spoken varieties of many other languages. Example (1) illustrates this type.

- (1) (Det) vet jag inte
(That) know I not

Det-less clauses. Det-less clauses are clauses where a *det* 'it/there' is missing. Historically, there is a relationship between subject-verb agreement and expletive subject pronouns in V/2 languages. According to this analysis, the loss of subject-verb agreement in Swedish is one cause of the development of expletive subjects. These subjects have a place-holding function in modern Swedish. During an intermediate period in the 17th century sentences without the expletive pronoun (i.e. V/1 clauses) were common.

- (2) begynte först at fryse (Falk 1993:304, ex 57a)
began first to freeze

Definite subject inversion. The type definite subject inversion is also referred to as 'narrative inversion'. In this construction a definite subject

follows the initial verb in a declarative clause. (This implies that the word order is the same as in a Swedish yes/no question). The definite subject inversion is often used in narratives, to signal textual cohesion with the foregoing context or to introduce a new part of a narrative.

- (3) och wende han igen wid Rygnabro (Falk 1993:305, ex 60a)
and turned he back at Rygnabro

The differences between the different types are not obvious. There are structural similarities between topic drop and *det*-less clauses on one side and between *det*-less clauses and definite subject inversion on the other side. For example, the sentence *Regnade hela dagen* 'rained all day' is a *det*-less clause but can nevertheless be analysed as an instance of topic drop (for further discussion and interpretations, see Falk 1993:298-323).

As has been shown in this section, the V/2 pattern is not the only grammatical option in Swedish declarative main clauses, since there are also clauses where the verb is in initial position. In the following sections, the occurrences of verb-initial clauses in empirical studies of modern Swedish will be discussed.

3. Acquisition of Swedish syntax – Review of earlier studies

Although the acquisition of subject-verb order has not been the main focus of most studies of the acquisition of Swedish as a first language, comments about syntactic structures and verb initial clauses can be found in several studies. In one of the earliest documentations of Swedish child language, Cederschiöld 1944 finds it remarkable that children sometimes do not use the subject-verb word order (V/2) which is required in declaratives, but instead use interrogative verb-subject word order (V/1) (*pinga mor* 'run mother') (Cederschiöld 1944:121). Cederschiöld's interpretation is that the action is more important than the actor and therefore the verb is in initial position. He summarizes: "it is not easy for small children to put the words in the right order".

Sven Platzack 1973, discusses syntactic structures used by Swedish children and focuses on the differences between 4 year-olds and 6 year-olds. His investigation is based on the material later published in Eneskär 1978, where children were tested on two different occasions, once at the age of 4 and once at the age of 6 years. It is interesting that V/1 structures (in Platzack's terms 'inversion with empty foundation') seem to occur to a rather large extent in this material consisting of children's answers to

questions. More than half of the sentences with inverted word order are V/I clauses, with a small decrease between four and six years of age.

In the reports from the project Child Language Syntax (Söderbergh, Lange & Larsson) it is reported that Swedish children have an early preference for subject-verb order in multiword utterances where both subject and verb are present. However, the children's use of interrogative word order (i.e. V/I) to fulfil a declarative function is commented upon several times (e.g. Lange 1975:48, Lange & Larsson 1973, Larsson 1977)

It is worth noting that the studies from the 1970s follow the syntactic tradition of the time and interpret the V/I clauses found in the material by assuming different movement transformations, which are described in some detail. Lange 1975, 1976 and Lange & Larsson 1973 describe a movement transformation which moves the subject from its base-generated position before the verb to the end position of the sentence, thus following the verb in two-word and three-word utterances. Sven Platzack 1973 assumes that V/I clauses are the result of two transformations: one transformation that switches subject and verb (inversion) and one transformation that empties the initial position.

Håkansson 1988 looked into contextual factors and found that monologic contexts are favourable to V/I clauses. In her material, the children varied their word order patterns in a systematic way, and used more V/I clauses when talking to themselves than in conversation with an adult.

In a recent study, Christer Platzack 1993 discusses the acquisition of V/2 within a generative paradigm. His conclusion is that Swedish children start with simple VPs, without functional categories. The children's utterances at this stage do not show finiteness. In addition, the V2 constraint has not yet been acquired. In the next stage there are indications of a functional projection above VP and finiteness and V/2 are acquired. The V/I clauses found in his material are analyzed as instances of ergative verb constructions, where the verb may precede its argument (C. Platzack 1990).

Verb initial clauses are found to be very frequent in children's acquisition of Swiss German (Penner 1990, 1992). During a short period in the development of the two children studied, V/I patterns are even more frequent than V/2 patterns. This stage occurs around the age of 2;2 (Simone) and 2;4 (Michael). Penner's interpretation of the V/I dominance is that the child at this stage possesses verb-raising, but no slot to place any material before the verb. This implies that the verb has to be in the first position.

4. Present study

In the present study, longitudinal data from 6 Swedish children have been used to investigate the acquisition of word order. The children were monolingual Swedish children, recorded between the age of two and three years. Five corpora from each child¹ were used in the study. The total number of declaratives containing both subject and verb in this material is 909. 101 of these clauses are verb initial clauses, i.e. more than 10% of the data. Importantly, these examples exhibit the same syntactic structure as certain interrogatives, but the prosodic pattern is the one that is characteristic of declaratives, often with a heavy stress on the first element, i.e. the verb. The number of V/I clauses for each of the children is displayed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Distribution of V/I clauses.

Name	Recording:					total
	I	II	III	IV	V	
Erik	3	2	2	6	3	16
Joakim	2	1	2	3	3	11
Karin	4	2	1	-	-	7
Martin	2	9	22	2	2	37
Niklas	6	-	3	4	-	13
Sara	5	3	6	3	(no data)	17

As can be seen from Table 1, V/I clauses are used by all children in some recordings. There is no development to be seen between the different recordings. Except for Martin's third recording, the V/I clauses are distributed equally across the material.

Only four examples are of the type topic drop (*vet jag inte* 'know I not', etc. see above). Since these examples constitute a very small group, I will not deal with them further in this paper. The great majority of the V/I clauses (i.e. 97 clauses) are of the type definite subject inversion or *det*-less clauses. I will not attempt to differentiate between the two in the present study, since it is not always clear in child language, whether the child is intending to produce a definite or an indefinite subject. This is one of the features which can be used to distinguish *det*-less clauses from definite subject inversion (Falk 1993:303). The V/I clauses are further divided into subtypes, according to the type of verb involved.

¹From Sara we have only four corpora.

4.1 V/I clauses with auxiliaries

The majority of V/I clauses are examples with a modal or auxiliary verb: *kan* 'can', *ska* 'will', *vill* 'want', *måste* 'must' and *har* 'have'. They make up 36 examples of the total corpus. All children in the study use this type. Examples 4-8 illustrate this type:

- (4) Ska mamman ge (Erik 2;11)
will the mummy give
- (5) Ska den gå själv (Joakim 3;4)
Will it walk by itself
- (6) Kan inte mamma (Karin 2;0)
Can not mummy
- (7) Måste man blanda (Niklas 2;10)
Must one mix
- (8) Har du tatt den (Sara 2;10)
Have you taken it

4.2 V/I clauses with ergative verbs

Ergative verbs can be defined as verbs with only one argument – the internal argument. 35 examples of V/I clauses are used with ergative verbs such as *ramla*, *trilla* 'fall', *komma* 'come', *sitta* 'sit', *ligga* 'lie', *gå* 'go/walk', *bo* 'live', *hoppa* 'jump', *klättra* 'climb', *cykla* 'bike', *flyga* 'fly', *sova* 'sleep' and *åka* 'go'. This type is used by all children and it is illustrated in examples 9 to 14:

- (9) Ligger Mia (Erik 2;11)
Lie Mia
- (10) Går den (Joakim 3;4)
Walks it
- (11) Ramla nallen ner traktorn (Karin 1;11)
Fall the teddy down the tractor
- (12) Trilla ner den (Martin 2;8)
Fall down it
- (13) Sitta den där (Niklas 2;6)
Sit it there
- (14) Och åker dom (Sara 2;6)
And go they

4.3 V/I clauses with transitive verbs

Transitive verbs are verbs with two arguments, an internal argument (object) and an external argument (subject). In the material, 15 V/I clauses are with transitive verbs. All children except Karin use this construction. Examples 15 to 19 illustrate V/I clauses with transitive verbs.

- (15) Har vi en hund (Erik 2;7)
Have we a dog
- (16) Och ser man rumpan (Joakim 3;1)
And sees one the backside
- (17) Dricker han den maten (Martin 2;8)
Drinks he that food
- (18) Tar Niklas den (Niklas 2;6)
Takes Niklas it
- (19) Och har han den (Sara 2;3)
And has he it

4.4 V/I clauses with intransitive verbs

Intransitive verbs are defined as verb with only one argument, the external argument (the subject). Only five examples of intransitive V/I clauses are found in the material.

- (20) Titta upp pojke (Erik 2;9)
Looks up boy
- (21) Åskar det då (Martin 2;8) (two times)
Thunders it then
- (22) Plingar brandbilen (Martin 2;8)
Rings the fire-engine
- (23) Pumpa vi (Martin 3;0)
Pump we

4.5 V/I clauses with copular verbs

The copula is used in 10 examples of V/I clauses. The use of copular V/I clauses is illustrated in examples 24 to 28 below. All children except Karin use this construction.

- (24) Är min bil (Erik 2;7)²
Is my car
- (25) Jo, var det (Joakim 3;1)
Yes, was it
- (26) Är konis (Niklas 2;11)
Is strange
- (27) Är hon inte lessen (Martin 3;0)
Is she not sad
- (28) Är nu mamma där (Sara 2;10)
Is now mother there

4.6 V/1 clauses in child language – an interpretation

In summarizing the findings, it seems clear that Swedish children not only use V/2 but also verb initial declaratives. How is this to be interpreted? Let us begin by summarizing the empirical facts presented in previous sections.

There seems to be two linguistic contexts which favour V/1 clauses: auxiliaries and ergative verbs. The examples given in Penner 1992:259, 267 are also in auxiliary and ergative contexts. Also the V/1 clauses reported on from child language in Lange & Larsson 1977:80, Lange 1975, Larsson 1977:64, are mostly with ergative verbs. (Examples 29 and 30 are taken from Lange, example 31 from Larsson and example 32 from Lange & Larsson.)

- (29) Kom barn in (Freja 1;10)
Came child in
- (30) Ramla han backe (Freja 2;0)
Falls he hill
- (31) Komme flicka (Tor 2;2)
Comes girl
- (32) Ramla barnet (Embla 2;0)
Falls child

Interestingly, many of the utterances that Lange (1975:46-47) classify as 'ambiguous', are clauses with verb initial *stå* 'stand' and *ligga* 'lie'. According to Lange, these may be interpreted as either verb-object or verb-

²As has been pointed out to me by Cecilia Falk, some of these examples (24-26) can also be interpreted as instances of topic drop.

subject constructions. However, the interpretation of *ligge barn* 'lie child' as a verb-object construction, also involves a hypothesis about the child's use of ergative verbs as transitive verbs. We have here a choice between (at least) two contrasting views. (A) The children use transitive verbs as ergatives; i.e. the construction has a verb-object function (*ligger barn* 'lie child' is used instead of *lägger barn* 'lay child'). (B) the children use the verbs as an ergative; i.e. *ligger barn* 'lie children' with a verb-subject function. In the latter case, the expletive subject is omitted. (The adult equivalent would be *Det ligger ett barn där* 'It lies a child there'.)

Analysis of input data, i.e. of the speech used by the adult interlocutors in the present study, reveals that the ergative verb *komma* 'come' is used before its argument (almost always the subject) in as much as 70% of all occurrences. The most frequently occurring contexts are clauses with preposed adverbs (see ex 33) and V/1 clauses (see ex 34).

- (33) Här kommer en liten flicka (adult in interaction with Martin 2;8)
Here comes a little girl
- (34) Kommer flodhästen där (adult in interaction with Martin 2;8)
Comes the hippopotamus there

This implies that SV word order in the context of this verb is 30% instead of 60% which is the mean value for spoken Swedish (Jørgensen 1976). The frequency of occurrence of verb-subject inversion in the context of *kommer* 'come' gives the child rich possibilities of acquiring the verb-subject pattern. In language acquisition it is common that a rule is first applied in certain contexts and then spread to other contexts (cf. Hyldenstam 1977, 1978). A plausible hypothesis is that children first use subject-verb inversion, i.e. in this case V/1 clause with ergatives, and then the phenomenon is spread to other verbs. We thus find instances of V/1 with both transitive and intransitive verbs.

However, this hypothesis is not directly applicable to the V/1 clauses with auxiliaries. I would like to suggest that these clauses are the result of another rule in the child's grammar. In Håkansson & Dooley Collberg *forthc.*, it is suggested that modal auxiliaries are interpreted as syntactic elements of INFL, and only at a certain stage are they identified as true verbs by the children. This implies that the auxiliaries occur correctly in front of the negation in main clauses at the stage when the main verbs are placed after the negation. When the CP node is added, this allows a verb movement to C and the negation is also correctly placed in sentences with

only main verbs. However, before the re-analysis of auxiliaries as verbs the child uses sentences where the negation appears to be cliticized to the auxiliary and the subject occurs after it (e.g. *får inte man ta den* 'may not one take that') Furthermore, we see a delayed acquisition of preverbal negation in subordinate clauses in auxiliary context (see Håkansson & Dooley Collberg, *forthc*). Following this analysis, we can assume that, in V/I clauses with auxiliaries, the auxiliary is generated in INFL and that no verb movement is applied.

5. L2 acquisition of Swedish word order

It is surprising that so few studies have focused on first language acquisition of subject-verb order, taking into consideration that there are a great number of studies on second language acquisition of Swedish word order (e.g. Hyltenstam 1977, 1978, Hammarberg & Viberg 1979, Bolander 1988, Colliander 1993). One possible explanation for this difference in focus is that L1 children rarely make V/2 errors whereas L2 learners make a lot of errors in this area. The acquisition of V/2 is one of the most problematic areas for second language learners and it takes a considerable time to automatize the rules even for learners who receive instruction.

In order to compare L2 acquisition to L1 acquisition, data was collected from six L2 children acquiring Swedish as a second language. The informants were refugee children who arrived in Sweden at an age of three years or more. They were recorded three or more times at regular intervals during one year. For the present study three corpora from each child have been analyzed. The total number of declaratives containing both a verb and a subject is 1148. The number of V/I clauses is 9, i.e. less than 1% of the whole material. The number of V/I clauses for each of the L2 children is illustrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Distribution of V/I clauses in the speech of L2 children.

Name	Recording:			total
	I	II	III	
Ali	-	2	-	2
Cynthia	-	-	-	-
Hannibal	-	1	2	3
Helena	-	-	-	-
Leila	-	1	1	2
Maria	1	1	-	2

As Table 2 indicates, the number of V/I clauses are few, and not all L2 children do use V/I clauses. Of the nine V/I clauses, one is of the topic-

drop type (*Tror vi* 'Believe we'; Hannibal 6;0). The rest of the clauses are distributed as follows:

V/I clauses in Aux context

- (35) Får jag bajsas med den (Hannibal 5;10)
May I poo with it
- (36) Får vi inte låna (Hannibal 6;0)
May we not borrow
- (37) Ska han titta på TV (Maria 3;11)
Will he watch TV

V/I clauses with ergative verbs

- (38) Kommer hon (Ali 4;6)
Comes she
- (39) Kom dom (Ali 4;6)
Came they

V/I clauses with copula

- (40) Är de bil också (Leila 5;3)
Is it car too

V/I clauses with transitive verbs

- (41) Öppnar han dörren (Leila 5;2)
Opens he the door
- (42) Har hon säng (Maria 4;2)
Has she bed

The types of V/I clauses in the speech of the L2 children match the types used in the L1 production. There is, however, a striking difference in the frequency of use.

6. Comparison between L1 and L2 acquisition of Swedish

As was mentioned earlier, results from L2 acquisition studies show that L2 learners differ considerably in acquiring Swedish word order rules. One of the most enduring errors is the violation of the V/2 constraint by use of XSV clauses. L2 learners tend to ignore the inversion rule and use V3 sentences, eg. *Sen han åker* 'Then he goes' instead of *Sen åker han* 'Then goes he'. Interestingly enough, this is a common phenomenon also in the speech of Swedish children with specific language impairment (SLI) (Håkansson & Nettelbladt 1993). In Table 3, the number and relative

proportions of V/1 and V/3 sentences out of the whole corpus of sentences containing subject and verb are displayed for three different groups of children, L1 children, L2 children and SLI children.

Table 3. The distribution of V/1 and V/3 clauses.

Group	total	V/1 (%)	V/3 (%)
L1 (n=6)	909	101 (11%)	9 (1%)
L2 (n=6)	1147	9 (1%)	88 (8%)
SLI (n=2)	194	7 (4%)	24 (12%)

These results support earlier findings from Håkansson & Nettelbladt 1993 (cf. also Schlyter & Håkansson *forthc*). Typically, the V/1 structures are used by L1 children and the V/3 structures are used by L2 children. The SLI children form a group on their own, using fewer V/1 clauses than the L1 children but more than the L2 children and using most V/3 clauses of all groups. Since the position of the verb in the clause also involves the position of the verb relative to the subject, these patterns also reveal another important distinction: whether the subject always precedes the verb or whether there is variability. In V/1 clauses the verb is always before the subject whereas the subject is always preceding the verb in V/3 clauses. It seems as if the problem for L2 learners and SLI children in acquiring the V/2 pattern is partly the result of another problem, i.e. of having the verb precede the subject. If we compare sentences with SV word order to sentences with VS order the pattern is still stronger. L1 children of Swedish use an adult-like proportion of word order variation right from the beginning whereas L2 and SLI children favour an SV pattern.

The results from this comparison suggest that there are different ways of coping with Swedish word order rules in language acquisition. L1 learners use a variable word order, where the subject may precede or succeed the verb, irrespective of topicalized elements. L1 learners (and also SLI) use a rigid SV word order, even if a topicalized element precedes. This calls for a more detailed description of the V/2 effect, where three different processes can be distinguished: (1) Subject may come after the verb. (2) Elements may be topicalized. (3) If 2 apply 1.

These processes work differently in the acquisition of V/2 by different learner groups³.

³It is interesting that the distinction between different parts of V/2 can also be used when describing language loss. Some Swedish aphasics tend to lose part 1 and use part 2, i.e. XSV sentences (Håkansson *ms*).

1. L1 children acquire part 1 first, later part 2 and 3 simultaneously.
2. SLI children acquire part 2 first, then part 1 and 3
3. L2 learners acquire part 2 first, then part 1 and 3.

7. Are V/1 clauses part of the target grammar?

Looking into data on child language we find not only V/2 clauses, which are supposed to be the target, but also V/1 clauses. The use of V/1 clauses is most striking in the children's speech, but there are also examples in the speech of the adult interacting with a child. This raises an important question. Are V/1 clauses really part of the target grammar? According to descriptive grammars V/1 clauses are virtually non-existent in contemporary Swedish.

In empirical studies of spoken Swedish, however, V/1 clauses as well as V/2 clauses are found (Dahlbäck & Vamling 1983). Furthermore, the data on first language development of Swedish in the present study, suggest that V/1 clauses play an important role in child language. There is an interesting parallel between the development in language acquisition and the historical development of Swedish. In Falk 1993 the V/1 clauses are assumed to be a necessary step in the change of grammar, from verb-subject agreement to non-referential subjects. In the development of child language the V/1 clauses are important in a similar way, since they can be analyzed as a step towards existential clauses. The child can also infer from the input that both ergative verbs and certain intransitive verbs can have the arguments before or after the verb. These verbs make up the first domain where subject verb inversion is seen. The structure is made even more salient to the child because of the argument being more stressed than the formal subject in existential clauses (*Det kommer EN BIL där* 'It comes A CAR there'). Thus, what we have here is an interaction between prosodic, semantic and syntactic processes in L1 acquisition, where a semantically based analysis of the role of the verbal arguments is linked to a syntactic analysis where subjects are of importance. Also, the use of early V/1 clauses permits the child to use subject-verb inversion already at an early stage when MLU (mean length of utterance) does not yet allow topicalized elements. The V/1 clauses with only one verb can be claimed to have undergone a verb movement, if we define the verb movement as a raising to C with nothing in Spec CP (cf. Penner 1990, 1992, Falk 1993). However, the V/1 clauses with auxiliaries constitute a different kind of V/1. In this type, it is assumed that the auxiliary is not treated as a verb by the children, but as an element of INFL. This implies that there is no verb movement in these clauses.

The fact that L1 learners normally use more V/1 clauses (where there is subject-verb inversion but no preposed element) than do L2 learners is interesting considering the difficulties L2 learners exhibit in the acquisition of subject-verb inversion (Hyltenstam 1977, 1978, Bolander 1988 etc). It seems plausible that the possibility of having V/1 clauses instead of V/2 clauses in spoken Swedish is a property of the target language which is discovered by L1 children at an early stage.

In conclusion, insights from language acquisition may provide us with important knowledge about the target language. As has been pointed out by Linell (1982, *forthc*), there is often a written language bias in linguistic research. Grammatical descriptions of languages tend to concentrate on decontextualized grammatical structures used in certain types of written varieties. The findings from this study (and in Dahlbäck & Vamling 1983) show that there is more variation in word order patterns than is claimed when grammarians describe Swedish as a V/2 language. It is also interesting that contextual factors seem to be of importance in the choice of word order, since the V/1 clauses are most frequent in narrative contexts and free play situations (cf. Dahlbäck & Vamling 1983, Håkansson 1991). In order to better understand the nature of language acquisition processes it is important not only to have good descriptions of written forms of the target language but also to have a thorough knowledge of the grammatical forms that are used in contexts where children interact.

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