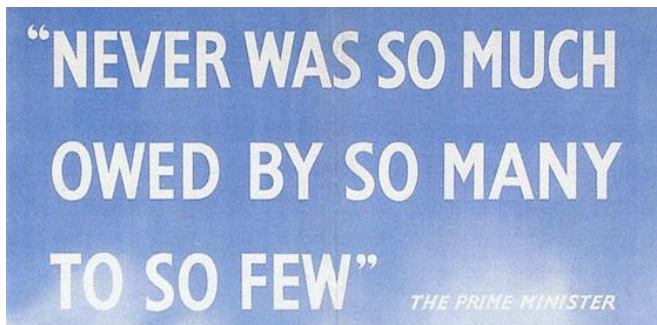


Linguistic construction called the "verb second constraint" could explain how people acquire language

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A new research project examining a linguistic construction called the verb second constraint could, academics believe, help to explain how people acquire language.

It's safe to assume that when Winston Churchill gave one of his most famous speeches in August 1940, the possible existence of universal grammar was far from his mind.

Nevertheless, it now appears that phrases such as "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few," could hold the key to understanding how humans acquire language from birth.

The sentence features a remnant of something called the "verb second" constraint; a linguistic construction which appears in most Germanic languages, but has disappeared from Romance (Latin-based) grammars, such as Spanish or French.

In simple terms, verb second, or "V2" languages are, as the name suggests, defined by the fact that the verb tends to take second place in a sentence.

Understanding why the principle was abandoned by one language family, but retained by the other, is the central objective of a [new project](#) that is being carried out by an international team of language scientists from the Universities of Cambridge and Oslo, among others.

The researchers believe that the verb second constraint could be used to test Noam Chomsky's famous, but contested, idea of universal grammar. The theory, developed in the 1950s, argues that humans acquire language because we possess an innate, hard-wired ability to do so.

Sam Wolfe, from the Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics and St John's College, University of Cambridge, said: "If we want to know whether or not universal grammar exists, we need to model what is actually going on inside our heads when we learn a language, so that we can better understand the toolbox we all make use of. The question is, how do you do that? One solution is to study language properties that might give us a clue, and the verb second constraint seems to be one of the best examples available – a lens to test that theory."

Strangely, English is the one example of a Germanic language that has not formally retained verb second, although vestiges of it, such as Churchill's famous phrase above, remain.

Modern V2 languages are distinguishable because the subject in a sentence—the person or thing performing the action described by a verb—will sometimes appear in a position after the verb, in order to keep the verb in second place.

Take the sentence, "Today the children are playing nicely". Here, the subject is "the children" and "playing" is the verb. In Norwegian, which is a V2

language, this translates as I dag leker barna fint. The actual word order here reads: "Today play the children nicely", keeping the verb, "play", second.

While Romance languages originally used verb second, it started to disappear from these grammars during the medieval period. Old French, for instance, seems to have abandoned it during the 16th century. Today, verb second is only used by one small group of endangered Romance languages, known as "Rhaeto-Romance", which are spoken in specific parts of the Swiss Alps and north east Italy, and which will be the focus of some of Wolfe's research .

Old English was also a V2 language and clear traces of the verb second remain in English today.

These include certain sentences that begin with a negative phrase. For example, in the sentence "Under no circumstances will I agree", the subject (I) comes after the auxiliary verb (will). This is also true of Churchill's line in his Battle of Britain address, in which the subject "so much", comes after the auxiliary "was".

verb second remnants can also be found in some phrases starting with "only". One well-known example is the Emperor's line to Luke Skywalker at the end of Return Of The Jedi: "Only now, at the end, do you understand". Here the auxiliary, "do" has moved to before "you".

Why verb second generally survived in Germanic languages but died out in most Romance grammars remains unclear. The researchers behind the new project believe that its retention may have hinged on other features of the language being present.

If this can be proven, it will point to the existence of universal grammar. Chomsky's theory relies on the idea that a language hangs together in certain fundamental ways, with different linguistic properties necessarily connecting to each other in order to work. These fundamentals are, the theory goes, an expression of the hard-wiring that enables any child to acquire language and use it to express concepts.

One theory that will be tested in the project is that the verb second itself is just one manifestation of a linguistic mechanism that is common to all languages and has parallels even in non-V2 grammars. The researchers believe that they may have already identified complementary properties in, for example, Western Iberian languages, and in French, but further tests are needed to see if these initial hypotheses are correct.

"There are still many questions over what form our innate ability to acquire languages takes, but it seems that certain properties of [language](#) may help to reinforce one another," Wolfe added. "The fact that verb second has survived in some languages but not others makes it a useful device with which to unpick that particular puzzle."

Provided by University of Cambridge

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