Verb second effects in Old French:
A result of contact- induced or language-internal change?

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Old French has often been attributed a Germanic-like verb second (V2) grammar (see the traditional accounts in Herman 1954, Thurneysen 1892, the syntactic analyses in Adams 1987, Roberts 1993, Vance 1997, and most recently Labelle 2007, Mathieu 2006; 2007). The V2 property requires the inflected verb to move into the second structural position of declarative matrix clauses, irrespective of which constituent occurs initially, e.g. the subject in (1) or the object in (2). Nowadays, French has lost the second option.

(1) *Le vallet **s'abessa*** [SV] *à la chaudiere*
'The manservant stooped over the boiler.'
(*Les Sept Sages de Rome*)

(2) *Josfroi de gyenvile **encharchierent*** [OV] *le mesage que …*
'The messengers charged J. de G. that …'
(Villehardouin: *Conqueste de Constantinoble*)

It is received wisdom that Old French had adopted this property due to long-term contact with Old High German (see von Wartburg 1946/1958).

In this study, I examine the plausibility of language contact as the decisive factor in the emergence of Old French V2 effects. Word order variation and its conditioning have been investigated in a corpus of Old French and Middle High German charters stemming from the language contact region. Word order patterns in Old French literary sources at a greater distance from the language border serve as point of reference. With this approach, accountable and systematic corpus-based comparison of varieties (cf. Poplack & Levey, in press), I intend to shed light on the actual role of contact.

The results show that proximity to germanophone areas did *not* favor V2 effects in Old French. On the contrary, violations of the V2 constraint occurred more frequently than in the non-contact data. Furthermore, the linguistic conditioning is *distinct* in the two languages, pointing towards a language internal explanation. Old French V2 effects are therefore unlikely to mirror a Germanic-like grammar.