

Why compare English to other languages?

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Wer fremde Sprachen nicht kennt, weiß nichts von seiner eigenen

If you do not know foreign languages, you do not know anything about your own.

(Goethe 1833, Maximen und Reflexionen)

Abstract

Comparative linguistics examines both differences and similarities between languages.

Comparing English to Danish, German or French, for example, allows us to characterise English (and also Danish, German or French). An explicitly comparative angle brings out the specific properties of each language more sharply than when each language is treated in isolation.

Also interesting is that such comparisons provide indications as to which properties of English, for example, might be particularly problematic (or particularly unproblematic) for Danish or German or French learners of English.

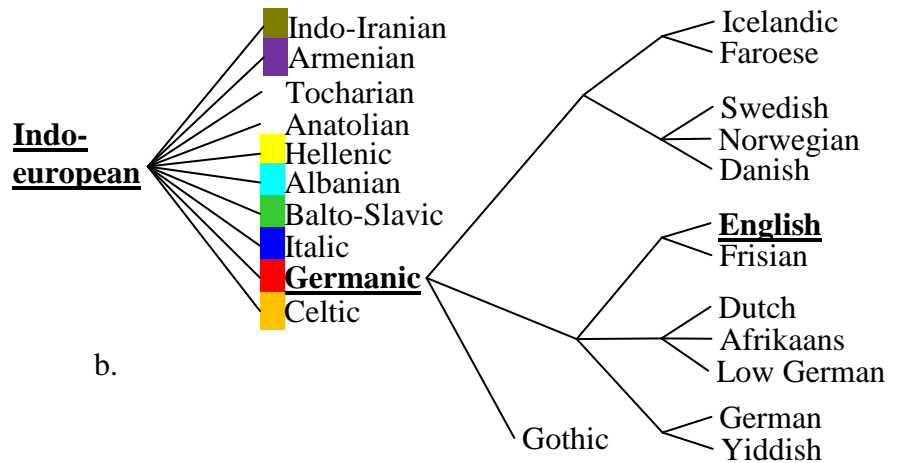
Such comparisons are an important part of a larger enterprise, namely the investigation of which kinds of variation exist between languages, and which kinds do not exist. Given that only humans have a capacity for language, such investigations allow for important contributions to be made to our knowledge about the scope and the limitations of the human brain.

1. Reasons for comparing English to other languages

(1)



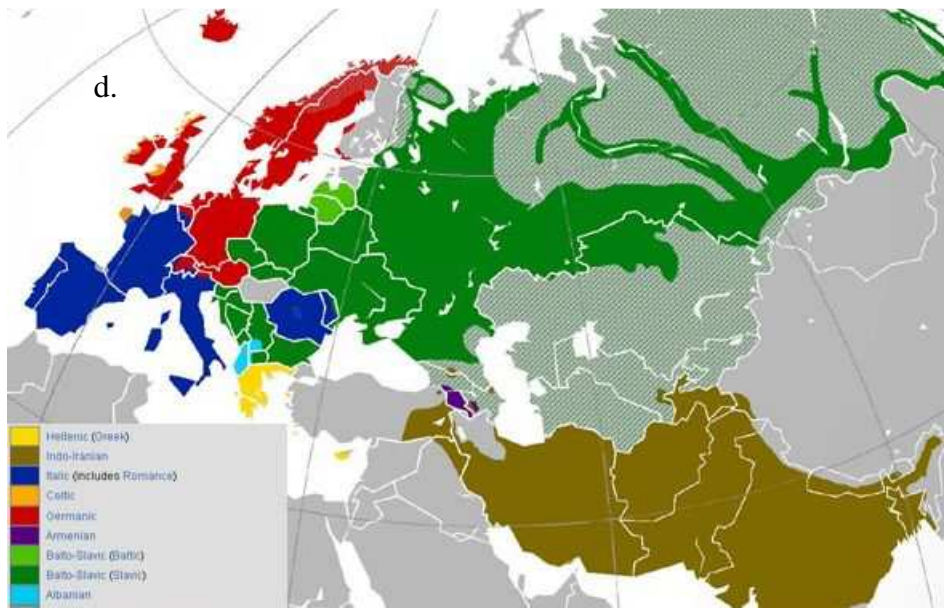
a. William Jones



b.



c. Rasmus Rask



e. Goethe



f. human brain



g. learning languages

h.



2. How to compare English to other languages

2.1 Phonetics

English distinguishes between the following pairs of sounds, whereas languages like Danish and German do not:

- (2) En. a. [θ] as in *think* vs. [s] as in *sink*
 b. [z] as in *eyes* vs. [s] as in *ice*
 c. [ʒ] as in *pleasure* vs. [ʃ] as in *pressure*

In the opposite direction, Danish has rounded front vowels (as do German and French), whereas English does not:

- (3) Da. a. [y] as in *en tyr* ('a bull')
 b. [ø] as in *det tør* ('it is thawing')
 c. [œ] as in *den er tør* ('it is dry')



2.2 Morphology

Also in morphology, there are differences, e.g. when it comes to inflection. English (like many other languages) includes person and number information in the inflectional forms of the finite verb, whereas Danish does not:

(4)	Danish	English	Middle English	French
	(21st cent.)	(21st cent.)	(14/15th c.)	(21st cent.)
Present				
1st singular	<i>jeg hører</i>	<i>I hear</i>	<i>I here</i>	<i>j' entends</i>
2nd singular	<i>du hører</i>	<i>you hear</i>	<i>thou herest</i>	<i>tu entends</i>
3rd singular	<i>han hører</i>	<i>he hears</i>	<i>he hereth</i>	<i>il entend</i>
1st plural	<i>vi hører</i>	<i>we hear</i>	<i>we here(n)</i>	<i>nous entendons</i>
2nd plural	<i>I hører</i>	<i>you hear</i>	<i>ye here(n)</i>	<i>vous entendez</i>
3rd plural	<i>de hører</i>	<i>they hear</i>	<i>pei here(n)</i>	<i>ils entendent</i>

In the other direction, Danish (like many other languages) includes gender and number information in the inflectional forms of the adjective, whereas English does not:

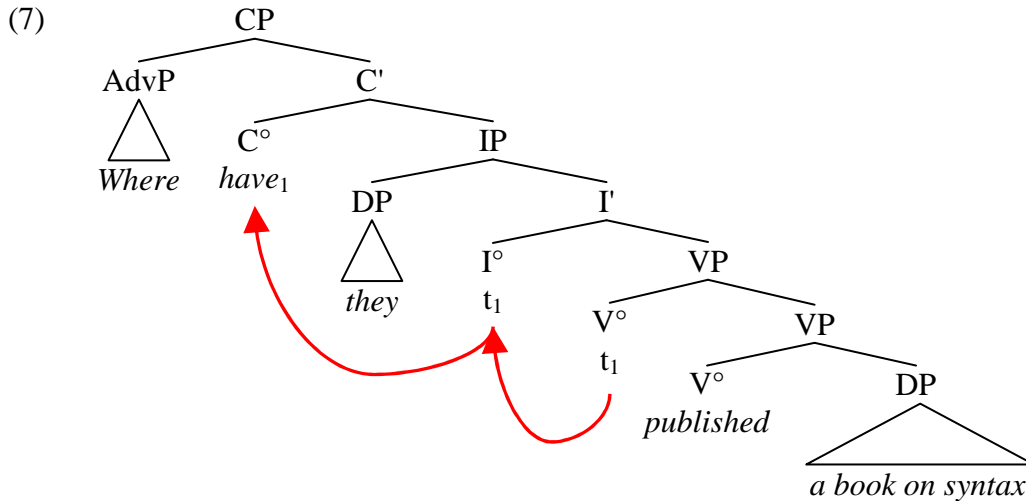
- (5) Da. a. en grøn bus vs. c. et grønt hus
 b. to grønne busser vs. d. to grønne huse
a.M+F.SG green.M+F.SG bus vs. *a.N.SG green.N.SG house*
two green.PL buses vs. *two green.PL houses*
- (6) En. a. a green bus vs. c. a green house
 b. two green buses vs. d. two green houses

Such differences are obviously relevant for e.g. language teaching, and they may also be relevant for linguistic theory, e.g. if it can be shown that they co-vary with other differences (as argued for (4) in Vikner 1997, 1999, 2005a, and as argued for (5)/(6) in Vikner 2001a,b).

2.3 Syntax

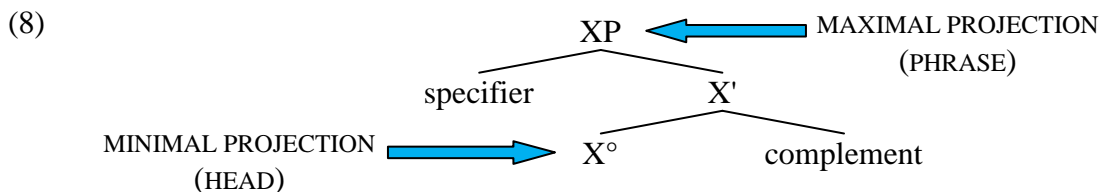
2.3.1 Basic analysis

If you want to know the syntactic structure of an English clause, you try to find out what the constituents ('the units') are. Here is a diagramme of an English question:



Such a diagramme is called a tree, and this is how we illustrate syntactic and morphological structure in **generative linguistics**. Generative linguistics is one of the formal approaches to linguistics (Vikner 2004) -- as opposed to functional approaches, which is the other major type of approach.

In the generative analysis, all syntactic constituents have the same **basic structure** across languages:



- (9) XP = phrase / the maximal projection of X
 X' = X-bar / the intermediate projection of X
 X° = head / the minimal projection of X (= e.g. a word or an even smaller unit)

Saying that XP and X' are projections of X expresses the idea that these constituents are built up around X°, such that e.g. [_{PP} *across the hall*] is built around [_{P°} *across*].

X in (8)/(9) above may stand for e.g.

(10)	N (noun) V (verb) P (preposition) Adj (adjective) Adv (adverb)	C ("complementiser" = subordinating conjunction) I (inflection) D (determiner) etc.
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Both heads and phrases (minimal and maximal projections) may **move** to other positions in the clause. However, heads may only move into other head positions, and phrases may only move into other phrase positions. X-bar constituents (intermediate projections) may not move at all.

2.3.2 Adjunction and constituency tests

Modification takes the form of **adjunction**. Both heads and phrases may be adjoined to other constituents. Heads may only adjoin to other heads, and phrases may only adjoin to other phrases. X-bar constituents may not be adjoined at all.

The adjoined constituent may be adjoined either to the left or to the right of the XP that it modifies:



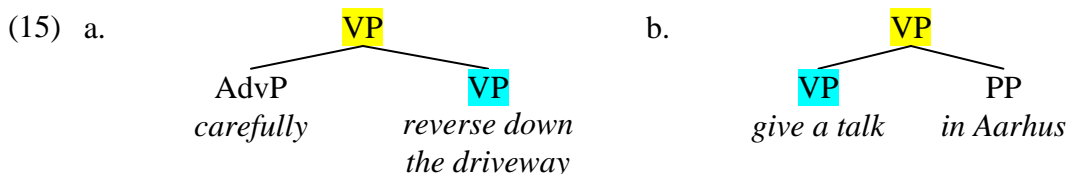
- (12) En. a. You should [_{VP} carefully [_{VP} reverse down the driveway]].
 b. You should [_{VP} [_{VP} give a talk] in Aarhus].

Many of the constituents can be supported by **constituency tests**. In (7) above, I assumed that *a book on syntax* formed a constituent, because this is supported by e.g.

- (13) En. a. She published a book on syntax with C.U.P.
 b. It was a book on syntax that she published with C.U.P.
 c. * It was a book on that she published syntax with C.U.P.
- (14) En. a. She published a book on syntax with C.U.P.
 b. What she published with C.U.P. was a book on syntax.
 c. * What she published syntax with C.U.P. was a book on.

In other words, if two or more words can undergo movement together, they form a constituent.

The adjunction analysis in (11)/(12) receives similar support from constituency tests: We can show that the (blue) VP which does not include the modifier is a constituent, (16)a & (17)a, and we can also show that the (yellow) VP which does include the modifier is a constituent, (16)b & (17)b.

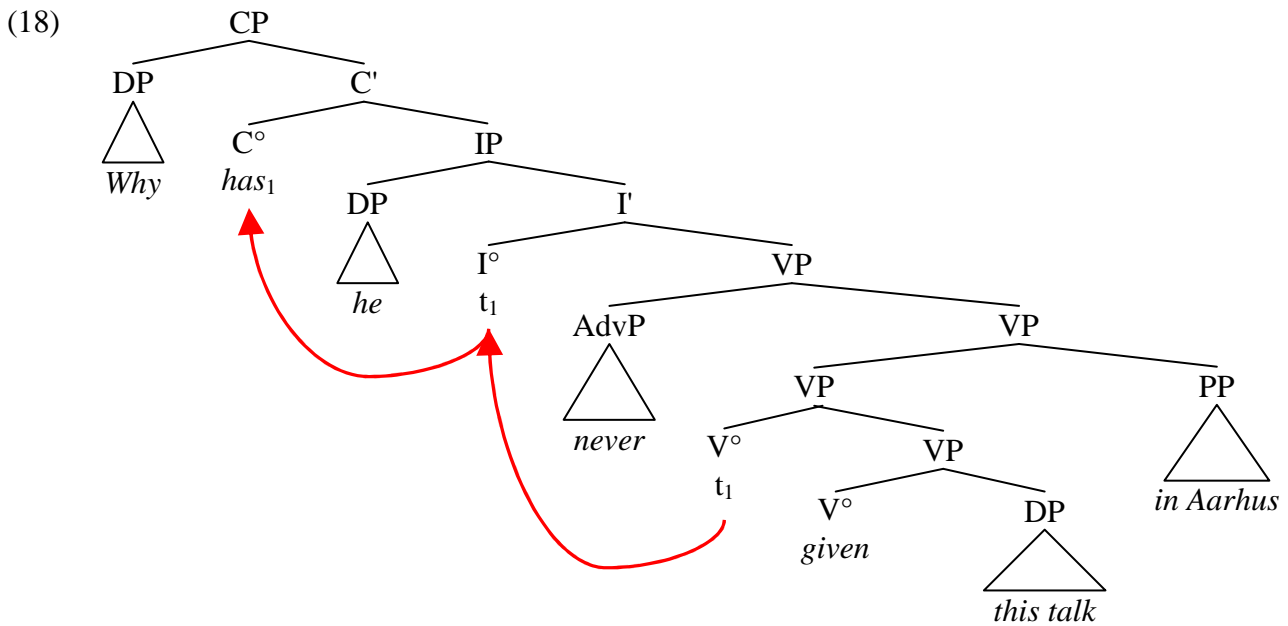


- (16) En. a. What you should carefully do is [_{VP} reverse down the driveway].
 b. What you should do is [_{VP} carefully reverse down the driveway].
- (17) En. a. What she did in Aarhus was [_{VP} give a talk].
 b. What she did was [_{VP} give a talk in Aarhus].

2.3.3 English-Danish differences on the left: Inversion / V2

Consider now the more complex example in (18), which is exactly parallel in English and Danish.

(Admittedly, there are a great many VPs here: One built up around the verb *give* and a second built up around the verb *have*. Then the adjunction of *in Aarhus* to the higher VP results in another VP, and then the adjunction of *never* to this VP results in yet another VP.)



Let us focus on the **inversion**, i.e. the movement of the finite verb to a position preceding the subject. In English, there is only inversion when the first element is either a **question element** (including the "invisible" question element in *yes/no*-questions) or a **negative element**:

- (19) En. a. [CP Why has_i [IP he t_i [VP never t_i given this talk in Aarhus]]]?
 b. [CP Has_i [IP he t_i [VP never t_i given this talk in Aarhus]]]?
 c. [CP Never has_i [IP he t_i [VP t_i given this talk in Aarhus]]].

When other elements precede the subject in English, this does **not trigger inversion**, and therefore such elements are taken to be adjoined to IP (rather than to be placed on the CP-level):

- (20) En. a. [IP Perhaps [IP he has_i [VP never t_i given this talk in Aarhus]]].
 b. [IP This talk [IP he has_i [VP never t_i given in Aarhus]]].
 c. [IP In Aarhus [IP he has_i [VP never t_i given this talk]]].

In Danish, as in all other Germanic languages except modern English, on the other hand, any element before the subject will cause inversion, (21). This is called **verb second** (or V2, Vikner 1995 and many others), because the result is that the finite verb occurs in the second position in all main clauses, immediately after the first constituent - even if this constituent is invisible, (21)b.

- (21) Da. a. [CP Hvorfor har_i [IP han t_i [VP aldrig t_i holdt det her foredrag i Århus]]]?
 b. [CP Har_i [IP han t_i [VP aldrig t_i holdt det her foredrag i Århus]]]?
 c. [CP Aldrig har_i [IP han t_i [VP t_i holdt det her foredrag i Århus]]].
 d. [CP Måske har_i [IP han t_i [VP aldrig t_i holdt det her foredrag i Århus]]].
 e. [CP Det her foredrag har_i [IP han t_i [VP aldrig t_i holdt i Århus]]].
 f. [CP I Århus har_i [IP han t_i [VP aldrig t_i holdt det her foredrag]]].

Finally, notice the difference in **the way inversion applies**.

In English, and only in English, **main verbs never leave the VP**, (22)a, and therefore inversion has to mean subject-auxiliary inversion. Consequently, an auxiliary is necessary whenever there is inversion, and so if the clause does not contain an auxiliary, *do* has to be inserted, (23)a.

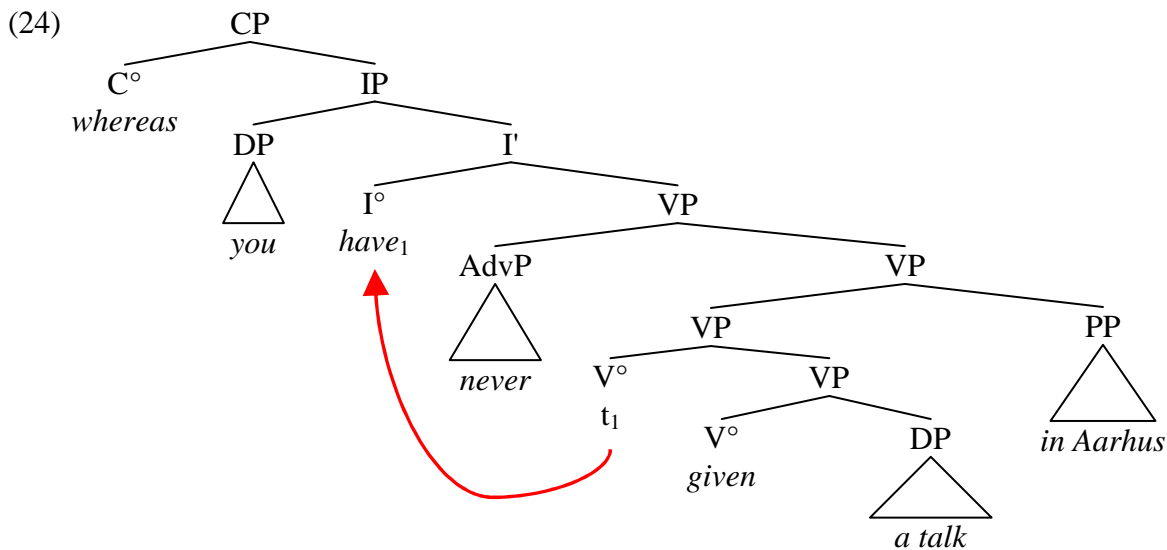
In Danish, **main verbs are perfectly happy to leave VP**, (22)b, and therefore inversion means subject-verb inversion. Consequently, *do*-insertion is not possible, (23)b. This is something Danish shares with almost all Germanic and Romance languages, where inversion also applies to main verbs and where there is no *do*-insertion.

- (22) a. En. * [CP Why gave_i [IP you t_i [VP never t_i this talk in Aarhus]]]?
 b. Da. [CP Hvorfor holdt_i [IP du t_i [VP aldrig t_i det her foredrag i Århus]]]?

- (23) a. En. [CP Why did_i [IP you t_i [VP never give this talk in Aarhus]]]?
 b. Da. * [CP Hvorfor gjorde_i [IP du t_i [VP aldrig holde det her foredrag i Århus]]]?

2.3.4 English-Danish differences in the centre: V°-to-I° mvt.

In embedded clauses, the subordinate conjunction immediately precedes the subject, and there is no inversion. This makes it possible to see what the differences are in the centre of the clause, e.g. that English auxiliaries **leave VP if they are finite**, whereas Danish auxiliaries do not.



- (25) a. En. ... [CP whereas [IP you have_i [VP never t_i given a talk in Aarhus]]].

- b. Da. ... [CP hvorimod [IP du [VP aldrig har holdt et foredrag i Århus]]].

In other words, when they are finite, English auxiliaries undergo V°-to-I° movement. English finite main verbs, however, do not undergo V°-to-I° movement, and neither do Danish finite main verbs:

- (26) a. En. ... [CP whereas [IP you [VP never give talks in Aarhus]]].
 b. Da. ... [CP hvorimod [IP du [VP aldrig holder foredrag i Århus]]].

This is a **historical change**, in that both English and Danish had V^o-to-I^o movement of all finite verbs until the 16th century, as do e.g. modern French and modern Icelandic. In Vikner (1997, 1999, 2005a), I link this to the **strength of verbal inflection** (see (4) above), as modern French and modern Icelandic have in common with earlier English and earlier Danish that there are/were different verb forms in most person-number combinations, whereas this is not the case in modern English and modern Danish.

2.3.5 English-Danish differences on the right: not much

As far as the word order inside VP is concerned, there do not seem to be very many differences between Danish and English. However, we do not have to look further than to German (see Wöllstein-Leisten et al. 1997, Vikner 2001, 2005b and many others) or into the history of English to find differences also in this domain. Where the order in English and Danish is verb-object, the order in Old English and German is object-verb:

verb object

- (27) a. En. ... that he should [VP see him].
 b. Da. ... at han skulle [VP se ham].

object verb

- (28) a. OE. ... þæt he [VP hine seon] sceolde.
 b. Ge. ... dass er [VP ihn sehen] sollte.
 ... *that he him see should*

3. Conclusion

I hope to have shown why it is interesting to compare languages, especially English and Danish, and also to have shown various ways to do this.

A particular focus was to illustrate one advantage of the linguistic approach that I favour - the generative approach - namely that it can be and has been applied to English as well as to Danish syntax, and indeed to the syntax of many other languages. As opposed to other more language-specific approaches (as discussed in Bjerre et al. 2008, Vikner 2015, 2016), it is therefore possible within the generative approach to directly compare the syntax of the two languages and to formulate the differences - with all the potential benefits discussed in section 1 above, concerning language history, language teaching, etc., etc.

- In English, finite auxiliaries and finite main verbs behave differently:
 - Finite auxiliaries undergo both inversion, (19), and V^o-to-I^o movement, (25)a.
 - Finite main verbs undergo neither inversion, (22)a, nor V^o-to-I^o movement, (26)a.
- In Danish, finite auxiliaries and finite main verbs behave alike:
 - Both undergo inversion/V2, (21)/(22)b , but not V^o-to-I^o movement, (25)b/(26)b.

Finally, it remains to be seen whether such insights could also be applied e.g. in secondary schools. I strongly suspect that they could (Vikner 2011, 2016:456).

Admittedly, my name turns up a lot in the list of references, but I want to stress that this kind of work is very much a cooperative effort. Therefore, before I stop, I would like to introduce some of the fellow linguists and colleagues who I have had - and still have - the fortune to work with in connection with various projects and grants:

Recipients of post doc grants from Forskningsrådet for Kultur og Kommunikation



Ken Ramshøj Christensen
2007-2010
*The Bones of Cognition –
Complexity and Structure in
Language, Cognition and Brain*



Johannes Kizach
2011-2014
*Word Order and
Efficient Communication*



Anne Mette Nyvad
2016-2018
*The Acquisition of
Complex Syntax in Autism*

2005-2007: **Object positions - Comparative linguistics in a cross-theoretical perspective**



Tavs Bjerre



Eva Engels



Henrik Jørgensen

www.hum.au.dk/engelsk/engsv/objectpositions/

2008-2012: **Similarities and Differences between Clauses and Nominals –
Comparative Syntax across Theoretical Approaches.**



Eva Engels



Steffen Krogh



Henning Nølke



Katrine Planque
Tafteberg



Johanna Wood

www.hum.au.dk/engelsk/engsv/clauses-nominals/

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