

Philology, Periodisation, and Syntactic Change: The Case of Sardinian, French, and Venetan

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0. Philology meets formal syntax in Romance

0.1. The Romance textual corpus

This article attempts to address a significant paradox: it is often noted that Romance linguists have a truly exceptional wealth of data with which to undertake synchronic and diachronic analysis, and that the Romance corpus thus constitutes a best-case scenario for the historical linguist (Malkiel 1974; 1988: 19; Ledgeway 2012: 1; Andreose & Minervini 2022: 123). For historical-diachronic study, the Romance family as a whole has a near-continuous textual corpus which spans over two millennia. Moreover, looking to the emergence of individual Romance vernaculars, many changes can be tracked diachronically through textual attestation over a seven- or eight-hundred-year period for dozens of standard and non-standard varieties.

Nevertheless, analysing the Romance textual records is fraught with problems. The classic ‘bad data problem’ (Labov 1994: 11) faced by all historical linguists is in fact applicable to numerous historical stages of Romance languages and, in particular, to the Latin-to-Romance transition and the following period, evidenced by textual records from the half-millennium covering the earliest Romance attestations through to the Renaissance. It is this latter period which concerns us here.

In this article we focus on three challenging case-studies from different branches of the Romance family and seek to show that despite the apparent restrictions imposed by text-type, genre, verse, and chronology, robust generalisations can be formulated which contribute to a theory of syntactic change in Romance, even when the philological record is seemingly problematic. The intention is not to negate legitimate concerns which apply crosslinguistically to the limitations of textual evidence, but rather to show that a ‘positivist’ view of their interpretation can lead us to form plausible theories for which a wide range of corroborating evidence can be sought.

0.2. Syntactic variation and change

The Modern Romance languages have made a central contribution to synchronic syntactic theory. In terms of their basic word-order properties all varieties spoken today –with the

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notable exception of certain Raeto-Romance varieties, which retain a Verb Second (V2) syntax¹ – have SVO word order. Beyond this point of commonality, however, Romance varieties show rich microvariation in other aspects of their clausal syntax due to variation in their null-subject properties (Roberts 2010; Camacho 2013; Sheehan 2016; Barbosa 2019), the subject pronominal system (Rizzi 1986; Kayne 1991; Cardinaletti & Starke 1999; Poletto 2000), the makeup of the clausal left periphery (Ledgeway 2010; Cruschina 2012; Cruschina & Remberger 2017; Wolfe 2022b), and the locus of verb movement (Pollock 1989; Belletti 1990; Poletto 2000; Ledgeway & Lombardi 2005; Schifano 2018; Ledgeway & Schifano 2022; Ledgeway & Roberts Forthcoming), to name a few central points of interest. It should be stressed that this rich picture of variation for Modern Romance is made possible principally, though not exclusively, through access to native-speaker informants. Deducing potentially fine-grained patterns of variation for periods where different varieties are only textually attested is, of course, an entirely different challenge and one that is discussed extensively in the historical linguistics literature.²

Although early observations were made in the 19th century that the Medieval Romance languages show fundamentally different word-order properties to their modern counterparts (Tobler 1875; Mussafia 1888; Thurneysen 1892; Meyer-Lübke 1897), a large volume of work analysing these differences only emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. For our purposes, the basic generalisations to note are that all the Medieval Romance languages were argued to have passed through a V2 stage, thus showing a prefield non-specialised for subjects, extensive postverbal subjects, and strong matrix/embedded asymmetries.³ Furthermore, Vanelli, Renzi, and Benincà (1986) demonstrated that the medieval period sees a split between two groups of Romance languages: one group, encompassing Southern and Central Italo-Romance, Ibero-Romance, and some Occitan varieties, shows full null-subject grammars, whereas a second group, including French, Northern Italo-Romance, and some Occitan varieties, shows an asymmetric distribution of null subjects, with heavy restrictions on their occurrence in

¹ See, among others, Haiman and Benincà (1992), Poletto (2000; 2002), Samo (2019), and Casalicchio and Cognola (2018; 2020).

² See, for example, the general discussion in Lass (1997: 61–103), Kiss (2005), Herring, Reenen and Schøsler (2000), and – for Romance specifically – Renzi and Andreose (2003) and Wright (2013).

³ For early generative work on these three properties see in particular Benincà (1983b: 4–5; 1995: 326), Vanelli (1986: 250; 1998: 230), Adams (1987a: 6–12; 1988), Hirschbühler and Junker (1988), Dupuis (1988), Roberts (1993: 56, 94–103), Salvi (1991), Vance (1993: 283; 1995: 177; 1997), and Ribeiro (1995).

embedded clauses. Their finding is significant as it suggests that in a similar fashion to the present day, the Medieval Romance languages were not a homogeneous group in syntactic terms.

While some of the most significant contributions to Medieval Romance scholarship in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s stressed the defining common features of the languages as a group (Benincà 1995; 2004; 2006; Salvi 2004), the last twenty years have seen a specific focus on variation between the languages and within them (Poletto 2006; 2014; Ledgeway 2008; Vance, Donaldson & Steiner 2009; Wolfe 2016; 2018a; 2018b; Rossi & Poletto 2022). This can be viewed in part as a reaction against the tendency – often implicit in the literature – to treat the medieval languages as a homogeneous group, or to treat the whole medieval period in a particular language’s history as a consistent whole.

Against the backdrop of a new focus on diachronic and synchronic variation within the early stages of the Romance languages, this article seeks to address two questions: firstly, to what degree do limitations of the available corpus hinder our ability to identify genuine differences between individual early Romance languages or groups of languages? Secondly, to what extent can we work with the textual records available to track the diachronic progression of individual languages and dialect groups and identify subperiods in their history? Although French is conventionally sub-periodised into ‘Early Old’, ‘Later Old’ and ‘Middle’ stages,⁴ a question remains over whether fine-grained diachronic schemata can be extended to other Romance languages, and if so, how similar or not the resulting picture is to that established for French. As we shall see, exploring this question is rendered especially challenging given the heterogeneous nature of the corpus for certain varieties.

In the discussion that follows it will be suggested that limitations of the corpus are legitimate but not absolute impediments to understanding the early syntactic evolution of the Romance languages. In fact, we will suggest that knowledge of one period in the history of a particular variety can, with appropriate caution, be used to profitably supplement our knowledge of another. Specifically, in this article it is suggested that four types of corroborating evidence should be considered when evaluating the value of a hypothesised syntactic system in particular groups of texts: (i) comparative evidence, from related languages, (ii) diachronic evidence, from earlier or later stages of the language in question, (iii) typological evidence,

⁴ The dating of each of these is controversial (Smith 2002), but there is consensus that there is a genuine correspondence between three distinct medieval periods and specific syntactic changes (Vance 1997; Wolfe 2020; 2021a).

which supports the typological plausibility of the purported syntactic system, and (iv) critical evaluation of the likely effects that textual features will have on the syntactic features in question.⁵ Using this methodology, it is suggested, we can reach a more nuanced understanding of the ‘text grammar’ being reconstructed.

0.3. Outline and methodology

The three sections that follow outline specific case studies from Romance linguistics where seemingly problematic textual corpora are necessarily employed to understand the evolution of individual or groups of languages; Section One discusses the Old Sardinian *condaghes*, Section Two Early Old French verse, and Section Three the Old Venetan corpus.

Taking these case-studies as a whole, it will be suggested that they still offer valuable insights for a theory of syntactic change in Romance and Section Four will offer some general remarks on how the findings contribute to a general theory of syntactic change in Romance.

1. Case-study One: The Old Sardinian *condaghes*

The syntactic system instantiated in the Old Sardinian *condaghes* offers an ideal case-study to discuss the challenges and opportunities when dealing with texts of a very particular nature. Despite aspects of Old Sardinian syntax being discussed as early as Meyer-Lübke (1902), they had at most a marginal significance in the explosion of work on Medieval Romance which appeared in the 1980s and 1990s. One could infer that the reason for this is the very specific nature of the Old Sardinian texts which survive: unlike the literary corpus available for many early Romance vernaculars, Old Sardinian survives in the form of legal-administrative documents which can appear on a first reading to be formulaic in nature. The documents are standardly divided into three categories: *statuti*, *carte*, and *condaghes* (Bentley 1999: 325; Wagner 1951: 46–47), with no narrative texts available prior to the 15th century. Looking at the *condaghes*, which record transactions, donations, and disputes on behalf of monasteries, the following entries are typical of the texts:

⁵ Note that, although there are important differences between the two exercises, (i) to (iii) would all standardly be employed when engaged in reconstruction of languages where there are no textual records at all. The literature here is vast, but see – on syntactic reconstruction in particular – overviews in Fox (1995), contributions in Ferraresi and Goldbach (2008), Willis (2011: 410–424), and Walkden (2013).

- (1) Postinke a scu. Petru de Silki Ithoccor de
 donate.3SG.PST=PRT.CL to Sanctu Petru de Silki Ithoccor de
 Kerki totta sa pathone sua de Silki
 Kerki all the part his of Silki
 ‘Ithoccor de Kerki donated all his portion of the land at Silki to Sanctu Pietro de Silki’
 (Old Sardinian, SPDS)
- (2) Partirus fijos de Torbini de Prunedu
 divide.1PL.PST children of Torbini de Prunedu
 ‘We divided up the children of Torbini de Prunedu’ (Old Sardinian, SMDB 100)
- (3) Positince Bicturu Plana sa parçone sua
 donate.3SG.PST=PRT.CL Bicturu Plana the portion his
 dessa terra de Collectariu
 of-the land of Collectariu
 ‘Bicturu Plana donated his portion of the land at Collectariu’ (Old Sardinian, SNDD 14)

The key observation for our purposes is that the entries most typically show a verb-initial word order, as opposed to the dominant V2 pattern reported elsewhere in Medieval Romance. Faced with this evidence, there are two major stances that could be taken: the absence of lengthy literary narrative texts and the subsequently restricted nature of the corpus has led a number of linguists and philologists to dismiss the Old Sardinian evidence as of minimal use for historical syntactic research. Wagner (1951: 48) and Blasco-Ferrer (2002: 64; 2017) also question the utility of the *condaghes* for the study of syntax on the basis that they may have been affected by interference from Greek and Tuscan, the former used as a major administrative language in Sardinia due to the island’s inclusion in the Byzantine empire in the 6th century AD (Paulis 2017; Orrù 2021). In addition, we should note that although the corpus available from medieval Sardinia is varied in terms of region (Wagner 1951: 365; Blasco-Ferrer 1984; Bentley 1999; Viridis 2004; 2021: 353–354; Boeddu 2020), the texts impede detailed diachronic analysis as the majority were composed in the early medieval period.

The sceptical stance would thus be that the Old Sardinian corpus is strongly restricted in terms of text-type and date of composition, partially or wholly formulaic, affected to an unknown degree by language contact, and therefore of minimal use to an overall theory of the syntactic evolution of the Romance languages. Whilst we cannot discount this possibility entirely, given the existence in these Old Sardinian texts, of a surface syntactic property – VSO – not attested elsewhere in Romance, we suggest that an interpretation of the texts as an

instantiation of a ‘real’ VSO grammar are more plausible on multiple grounds. Moreover, we suggest here that the Old Sardinian textual records are in fact of great importance to Romance historical syntax, particularly when assessed in their comparative and diachronic context.

Before evaluating the syntax of the texts and their purported ‘formulaic’ nature, it is appropriate to reflect on whether legal and administrative documents are as inherently problematic as they might seem. If we consider the *condaghes* specifically, they are not purely legal texts of a contractual nature but were used by monasteries to understand in detail the nature of the disputes. As Viridis (2021: 356) notes ‘[m]any of these charters take on a narrative relief that we could also describe as “proto- literary” in the sense that they were not confined to the simple registration of events and consequences. Very often we are given a precise narrative of the ways in which a given state of affairs had been reached. To some degree, these were “naive” narratives, set out in simple diction and easy to use’. It is also essential to note that the use of legal texts is not a quirk of the study of Old Sardinian but is a methodological component of a wide range of other Medieval Romance research: charters are widely used in studies of Old Occitan word order (Sitaridou 2005; Donaldson 2015; 2016; Wolfe 2018c) and, in the case of Old French, have been a core resource for understanding the evolution of the case system (Schøsler 2000; 2013), the ubiquitous particle *si* (Reenen & Schøsler 1992; 1993; 2000), and the diachronic trajectory of null subjects (Balon & Larrivéé 2016). Likewise, as we shall see in the case of Venetan (cf. §3), the legal text *Lio Mazor* does show fine-grained points of variation when compared to a wider range of texts from the Veneto region as a whole but is of considerable importance for our understanding of Old Venet(i)an, as originally argued in Benincà (1983a). To summarise, in linguistic areas with a greater diversity of text-types, legal texts do not show fundamentally distinct syntactic properties from their non-legal counterparts. While we cannot rule out that Sardinian legal and administrative texts may have shown exceptionality in this regard, the null hypothesis in a Romance context would seem to be the opposite.

Finally, we observe that although the diachronic range of the Old Sardinian corpus is such that it precludes longitudinal analysis in the late medieval period, the corpus also has certain advantages when compared to other Medieval Romance varieties: the early date of composition of a large number of Old Sardinian texts stands in sharp contrast to many Romance varieties where textual attestations from the 11th and 12th centuries are sparse if they exist at all. Consider, for example, the arborense *Condaghe di Santa Maria di Bonarcado* (1120/1130-1146), and the logudorese *Condaghe di San Pietro di Silki* (1073-1180) and *Condaghe di San*

Nicola di Trullas (1113-1140).⁶ Viewed from a different angle, these texts, as we will now suggest, have the potential to give us a unique insight into the syntactic properties of the very earliest Romance grammars.

Following earlier qualitative work by Viridis (1996) and Lombardi (2007), Wolfe (2015a; 2015b; 2018a: 106) finds that –in contrast to other Medieval Romance varieties– Old Sardinian shows a dominant verb-initial word order, with 52.24% (n=198) of his matrix corpus of the *Condaghe di Santa Maria di Bonarcado* and *Condaghe di San Nicola di Trullas* showing the verb in first position, as opposed to 43.01% (n=163) which shows linear V2 word order. Several factors suggest that these verb-first orders are not a stylistic quirk of the text. Firstly, the alternation between Verb-Subject, Subject-Verb, and XP_{Non-Subject}-Verb(-Subject) orders is not random: pronominal subjects systematically appear preverbally (4a), as do nominal subjects with a highly referential status (4b), whereas postverbal subjects in Verb-Subject orderings can encode new or old information, with a preference for the former (5) (Wolfe 2015a: 198):

(4) a. Et ego tramudu cun monagu Petru de Bonarcadu
 and I trade.1SG.PST with monk Petru de Bonarcadu
 ‘And I traded with the monk Petru of Bonarcadu’ (Old Sardinian, SMDB 88)

b. Ecclesia levait a Gunnari Cosi et Saraginu
 church take.3SG.PST to Gunnari Cosi and Saraginu
 Mula et Goantine su frate
 Mula and Goantine the brother
 ‘The Church took Gunnari Cosi, Saraginu Mula, and Goantine, his brother’ (Old Sardinian, SMDB 23)

(5) Furedi sas apes Troodori Paranna
 steal.3SG.PST the bees Troodori Paranna
 ‘Troodori Paranna stole the bees’ (Old Sardinian, SMDB 64)

The tendency for old – i.e., topical– information to be encoded preverbally also extends to non-subject constituents (6), although, as with subjects, new information or contrastive foci are also licensed preverbally in linear V2 configurations (7):

⁶ Dates of composition given here are based on those in Blasco-Ferrer (2017: 128–129).

(6) Custu deit cun voluntate d’onna fiio suo
 this give.3SG.PST with agreement of-all child his
 ‘He gave this with the agreement of all his children’ (Old Sardinian, SMDB 18)

(7) in iotra lu tutarus
 in cloisters him.CL bury.1PL
 ‘We buried him in the cloisters’ (Old Sardinian, SMDB 77)

An additional indicator that verb-initial orderings are not a purely stylistic choice comes from the syntax of embedded clauses. In sharp contrast to matrix clauses, where we have seen that verb-initial orders alternate with a variety of other productive word-order patterns, Old Sardinian complement, relative, and reason clauses show an overwhelmingly dominant V(S)(O) order: in Wolfe (2015a: 182) verb-initial orders constitute 100% of a 208-clause sample and a subsequent sub-corpus of all complement clauses in both the *Condaghe di Santa Maria di Bonarcado* and the *Condaghe di San Nicola di Trullas* appearing in Wolfe (2018a: 118) shows all forty clauses to have a V1 order. Consider the examples in (8) in this regard:

(8) a. ... ki lu iscian ca la posit a clessia
 that it.CL know.3PL.PST that it.CL give.3SG.PST to church
 ‘that they knew that [during his life] he gave it to the church’ (Old Sardinian, SNTD 14)

b. Et ego naraili ka «‘nke lu posit
 and I say.1SG.PST=them.CL that part.CL it.CL give.3SG.PST
 donna Vera de Athen»
 donna Vera de Athen
 ‘And I told them that Donna Vera de Athen donated it’ (Old Sardinian, SNTD 245)

These pervasive data from the embedded domain –striking in a comparative context, with SVO typically obtaining elsewhere in Medieval Romance (Benincà 1983b: 6–8; Vanelli, Renzi & Benincà 1986: 56–57; Adams 1987b; Roberts 1993: 142; Vance 1997: 133–197; Ledgeway 2008: 439–440; Salvi 2011: 367; Poletto 2014: 2; Wolfe 2015c; 2018a)– challenge in very substantive terms the notion that verb-initial orders in Old Sardinian are a stylistic device. If this were so, would such stylistic conventions plausibly extend to embedded clauses? Rather, such patterns fall out naturally if we assume that the basic VSO word order of Old Sardinian can be manipulated for discourse-pragmatic effect in matrix clauses but not in embedded

clauses, in keeping with many other languages which show comparable matrix/embedded asymmetries (Ross 1973; Aelbrecht, Haegeman & Nye 2012; Miyagawa 2012).

If we take as our starting position that the Old Sardinian textual records present us with a ‘genuine’ instantiation of a VSO syntax, how synchronically plausible is this, based on what we know of other Medieval Romance varieties?

Firstly, we should note that aside from the apparently exceptional status of the dominant VSO order in the Old Sardinian textual records, other core aspects of its syntax pattern expectedly with other (Early) Medieval Romance varieties. We have seen that constituents can undergo focalisation or topicalisation to a left-peripheral projection (4, 6, 7), which is a property uniformly attested across the earliest Romance textual records (cf. for review Wolfe 2016:§5.1). Relatedly, Lombardi (2007) and Wolfe (2015a: 182–183) highlight that proclisis or enclisis appear to correlate with the focal or topical status of the fronted constituent, again as is reported for other medieval varieties by Salvi (1991) and Benincà (1995: 335; 2004) amongst others. Furthermore, we should note that Old Sardinian permits multiple constituents to occupy the left-peripheral domain (9); this is, once again, entirely in keeping with what is reported for other Early Medieval Romance varieties (Benincà 1995: 329; Ledgeway 2007: 124; Salvi 2012: 105; Poletto 2014: 16; Wolfe 2016: 468). Consider, in this regard, the following examples in (10, 11) from 12th-century Occitan and Spanish respectively, which also show V3* orders where multiple topics and foci precede the finite verb:

(10) E [Topic sobre tot aizo [Focus per amor de Deu e de sant
 And above all this for love of Lord and of Saint
 Antoní [Fin... donam segur a totz aquels omes et
 Anthony give.1PL insurance to all those men and
 todas las femenas ...]]]
 all the women

‘And in addition to this, for our love of the Lord and Saint Anthony, we insure all those men and women ...’ (Old Occitan, Chartes, 41, 1143)

(11) [Frame Si nos d’aquí non imos [Topic en paz [Focus nunca
 if we from-here NEG go.1PL in peace never
 [Fin... bivremos]]]]
 live.FUT.1PL

‘If we don’t leave here we’ll never live in peace’ (Old Spanish, Alexandre 254, 1178-1250)

To what then does the fundamental difference between Old Sardinian and other Medieval Romance varieties amount? In keeping with the findings in Wolfe (2015a; 2018a), we suggest that Old Sardinian only features ‘half’ of the V2 constraint (Roberts 2005: 123), that is to say verb movement to the left periphery without the second component of V2, namely optional rather than obligatory fronting of an XP in a left-peripheral position. Such an account accurately predicts that Old Sardinian shows many of the bundle of properties associated with the Early Medieval Romance languages as a group, but differs in one major respect, which manifests itself most directly at a surface level as a dominant verb-initial rather than verb-second ordering (12).

(12) a. Early Medieval Romance \Rightarrow [_{Frame} [_{Topic/Focus} **XP** [_{Fin} [_{Fin} **V**][_{T...}]]]]

b. Old Sardinian \Rightarrow [_{Frame} [_{Topic/Focus} (**XP**) [_{Fin} [_{Fin} **V**][_{T...}]]]]

Two pieces of indirect evidence further support this hypothesis and demonstrate how typological and diachronic insights can corroborate analyses of syntactic systems in potentially problematic texts. Firstly, the postulation of a VSO system in the same linguistic family as one where other languages show V2-effects is far from typologically exceptional: this is the precise situation, to choose one example, in the Modern Celtic languages (Tallerman 1996; Willis 1998; Roberts 2005; Jouitteau 2007; 2010). Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, recent analyses of Latin have suggested that subliterate and late Latin texts show an incipient form of V2 syntax (Salvi 2004; Antonelli 2015; Ledgeway 2017), where systematic verb movement to a left-peripheral head, plausibly Fin, obtains, but XP-fronting continues as a pragmatically marked option, as it was in Classical Latin. This in itself rests on an entirely plausible reanalysis in general diachronic syntactic terms, that a previously syntactically or pragmatically marked operation comes to be reanalysed as unmarked.⁷ Viewed under this lens, Old Sardinian constitutes a linguistic missing link between Latin and Romance, as it preserves the conservative (XP)-VSO system of late and subliterate Latin, while also displaying a number of innovative morphosyntactic properties observable elsewhere in the early Romance vernaculars.

To conclude, we have suggested that far from deserving their place at the margins of

⁷ See Roberts (2021a) for a range of case-studies, alongside Walkden (2014) who makes this specific proposal for the emergence of V2 in Germanic.

Medieval Romance studies, the insights that can be gleaned from an examination of the Old Sardinian texts are extremely valuable. We have suggested that the legal-administrative nature of the texts is not as problematic as may at first appear and that the proposal that Old Sardinian had a VSO syntax, derived via V-to-Fin movement, is synchronically plausible, typologically supported, and evidenced by the diachronic analysis of late and subliterate Latin V2.

2. Case-study Two: Early Old French verse

Our next case-study comes from Old French, in particular the very earliest French texts, the vast majority of which consist of verse. To illustrate this point, consider the 56 texts in the Base de Français Médiéval composed prior to 1200, 41 of which are in verse, or the corpus constructed for the *Grande Grammaire Historique du Français* (Marchello-Nizia et al. 2020), where 19 of 24 texts for the Early Old French corpus are verse texts. More specifically, numerous linguistic studies draw on the *Chanson de Roland* to illustrate the properties of Early Old French (more accurately Early Anglo-Norman), which is composed in verse. The problem for Romance historical syntax is therefore the following: given that verse crosslinguistically is acknowledged to have often idiosyncratic linguistic properties, can we find reliable generalisations about the evolution of Old French based on an early corpus, the majority of which is written in verse? Our answer to this question will be a cautiously positive one.

Firstly, let us consider the basic generalisations that have emerged from research on Early Old French syntax, which draws principally on verse to reach its conclusions, before we assess the evidence using the comparative, diachronic, and typological evidence set out in §0.2 above. The texts present compelling evidence for a V2 grammar (Thurneysen 1892; Foulet 1919; Adams 1987a; Roberts 1993; Vance 1995; 1997; Benincà 1995; 2004; 2006; 2013; Salvesen 2013; Wolfe 2018a), showing the hallmark properties of a prefield not specialised for subjects (Skårup 1975: 9–69; Vanelli 1987: sec. 4.1; Roberts 1993: 85–87; Hulk & van Kemenade 1995: 235–236; Vance 1997: 43–47; Mathieu 2012: 327; Salvesen 2013: 135–136; Wolfe 2018a: 67–72; Ledgeway 2021) (13),⁸ Germanic (14) and Romance inversion (15), and strong matrix/embedded asymmetries, with V2 in matrix clauses giving way to SVO in the majority of embedded environments (16):

⁸ See Wolfe (2021a: 51) for presentation of a variety of studies on the Old French prefield, all of which conclude that the preverbal field is not a specialised subject position, as would be expected in an SVO language.

- (13) a. Un faldestoed i unt
 a chair LOC.CL have.3PL
 ‘They have a folding chair’ (Old French, Roland 115)
- b. Par Petit Pont sont en Paris entré
 by Petit Pont be.1PL in Paris come.PTCP
 ‘They entered Paris by the Petit Pont’ (Old French, Nîmes 11, 27, Roberts 1993:95)
- (14) Après iço i est Neimes venud
 after this LOC.CL be.3SG Neime come.PTCP
 ‘Neime came after this’ (Old French, Roland 230)
- (15) Sur nus est venue male confusiun
 upon us be.3SG come.PTCP bad disaster
 ‘A great disaster has befallen us’ (Old French, Roland 2699)
- (16) Il me dist que il me trova// en un bois
 he me.CL tell.3SG.PST that he me.CL find.3SG.PST in a wood
 ‘He told me that he found me in a wood’ (Old French, Thèbes1 505)

Furthermore, we note that the preverbal constituent in Early Old French verse texts can be both topical (Kroch 1989: 213–215; Vance 1997: 234; Salvesen 2013; Vance, Donaldson & Steiner 2009) or focal, with focussed constituents consisting of new information foci, contrastive foci, and fronted QPs (Labelle 2007: 302–305; Mathieu 2012: 341; Labelle & Hirschbühler 2018: 275–280; Wolfe 2021a: 51–53):

- (17) Ço dist li reis
 this say.3SG the King
 ‘The King says this’ (Old French, Roland 327)
- (18) a. Un filz lur dunet
 a son them.CL give.3SG.PST
 ‘He gave them a son’ (Old French, Alexis 28)
- b. .XX. eschles ad li reis anumbrees
 twenty columns have.3SG the king number.PTCP
 ‘The King has organised them in twenty divisions’ (Old French, Roland 112)

The particle *SI* can also act as the initial constituent of a V2 clause, predominantly serving as a marker of topic-continuity (Fleischman 1991; Buridant 2000: 508) but also at times showing

an incipient expletive function (Wolfe 2018b), in particular after an initial clause:

- (19) a. Rollant reguardet, // puis si li est curut
 Roland look.3SG then SI him.CL be.3SG run.PTCP
 ‘He looks at Roland and then [he] runs towards him’ (Old French, Roland 2086)
- b. Quant l’ot Rollant, si cumençat a rire
 when it.CL=hear.3SG Rolland SI begin.3SG.PST to laugh.INF
 ‘When Roland heard this, he began to laugh’ (Old French, Roland 303)

In contrast to the sharper restrictions on V3* orders reported for Later Old French, Early Old French verse shows numerous matrix clauses where three or more constituents appear before the finite verb (Rouveret 2004: 189–190; Labelle 2007: 296–303; Salvi 2012: 105; Wolfe 2016: 468; 2021a: 114):

- (20) E puis les cors des barons si unt pris
 and then the bodies of-the barons SI have.3PL take.PTCP
 ‘And then they take the bodies of those barons’ (Old French, Roland 2967)

Finally, note that in a further contrast with Later Old French prose, verb-initial orders are licensed in a variety of discourse-marked environments in Early Old French (21). This has been argued by Roberts (1993: 144), Vance (1997: 32), Wolfe (2021a: 118–119) and others to be linked to more liberal licensing conditions on *pro*, which can also appear in a greater range of embedded environments than in Later Old French, yielding a more symmetrical null-subject system than is found in later texts, where embedded null subjects are licensed in a greater range of contexts (22) (Hirschbühler 1990; Roberts 1993):

- (21) a. A un jor li mut grant tempeste
 have.3SG one day the very great storm
 ‘There was one day a very great storm’ (Old French, Eneas1 187)
- b. Vint en la presse, sur les autres s’escriet
 come.3SG.PST in the crowd upon the others REFL.CL=call.3SG.PST
 ‘He came into the crowd and called upon the others’ (Old French, Roland 961)
- (22) Set anz ad pleins que en Espagne venimes
 seven years have.3SG whole that in Spain come.1PL.PST

‘It’s been seven whole years since we came to Spain’ (Old French, Roland 197)

Overall, if we take the Early Old French prose texts at face-value, the syntactic system we postulate is as follows: Early Old French features a V2 syntax, with finite verb movement to a low left-peripheral head, Fin, which accounts for the permissive range of V3* orders licensed within the texts. Furthermore, the full range of topic and focus projections appear to be active in the left periphery, and the prefield is thus genuinely ‘unrestricted’ in terms of the constituents which can be licensed in V2 context. In addition to this, Early Old French licenses verb-first in certain marked syntactic and pragmatic contexts, as well as in a greater range of embedded domains than is the case in Later Old French.

We should now consider whether we should indeed take this system at face value, or instead take the stance that verse texts are an unreliable basis for reconstructing the grammar of a dead language. Perhaps the most important point of all to consider here, though one sorely lacking in numerous treatments of Old French syntax, is that within a comparative Romance context, the properties of the Early Old French verse texts are entirely unexceptional. As was already noted above, V2 effects – with the notable exception of Sardinian (cf. Section 1) – are a pan-Medieval Romance phenomenon from the very earliest texts onwards. Moreover, ‘relaxed’ V2 properties, where topics and foci can co-occur, yielding a relatively large number of V3* orders, and *pro* is licensed in a range of marked verb-initial structures, are also properties reported for a range of Medieval Romance Italo-, Ibero-, and Gallo-Romance varieties (Salvi 2004; 2012; Vance, Donaldson & Steiner 2009; Labelle 2007; Ledgeway 2008; Labelle & Hirschbühler 2018; Wolfe 2016; 2022b), as is the licensing of a maximally active focus layer in earlier or conservative texts. Crucially, these properties are attested in other Medieval Romance varieties where prose texts form the main basis of the textual corpus: consider Wolfe’s (2018c) study of Old Occitan, Fernández Ordóñez’s (2009) study of Early Old Spanish, Poletto’s (2006; 2014) study of Old Italian, and Ledgeway’s (2007; 2008; 2009) study of Old Neapolitan in this regard, which pattern with Early Old French in almost all core properties of its clausal syntax. To summarise the argumentation, although it is natural to be hesitant in considering a specific type of text as representative of a particular period, comparative evidence from elsewhere in Romance suggests it may nevertheless be legitimate to do so in the case of Early Old French verse.

As with Old Sardinian, however, we can also seek supporting diachronic evidence from the history of Latin and Romance. In this domain, we then ask whether the syntactic system we have assumed to be operative in Early Old French is consistent with what we know about

the Latin-to-Romance transition and subsequent changes in the Romance languages. The central characteristic of Early Old French verse, namely its V2 syntax, is – as we noted above in §2 – an area where we can reconstruct a diachronically plausible path of reanalysis from late and subliterate Latin: whereas in Old Sardinian and some late and subliterate Latin texts we see the outcome of reanalysis of pragmatically and syntactically marked V-to-C movement as unmarked V-to-Fin movement, in Early Old French verse we see evidence of additional reanalysis which yields ‘full’ V2, namely reanalysis of optional focalisation or topicalisation, itself present in Sardinian and widely attested in Latin,⁹ as obligatory movement, in order to satisfy a C-related movement diacritic. Viewed in this way, Old Sardinian instantiates a more conservative stage in the history of Romance clausal syntax than Early Old French verse, which can plausibly be considered the result of an additional reanalysis which has the surface effect of a shift from an (XP)-VSO grammar to a ‘relaxed’ one (Table 1):

Table 1. The Emergence of Fin-V2 in Romance

	Late and Subliterary		
	Classical Latin	Latin Old Sardinian	Early Old French Verse
Obligatory V-to-Fin Movement	-	+	+
Obligatory XP-Movement to Spec-FinP	-	-	+

Further support for reconstruction of Early Old French grammar as a ‘relaxed’ Fin-V2 system stems from a consideration of precisely how the output of a VSO grammar could have been reanalysed by acquirers as consistent with an underlying V2 system; two points are particularly significant: most importantly of all, a substantial proportion of verb-initial clauses must somehow be integrated into the innovative grammar. Secondly, linear V3* orders which were well attested in Latin of all periods and Old Sardinian must receive an analysis consistent

⁹ On Latin focalisation and topicalisation, alongside so-called ‘accidental’ V2 structures, see in particular Bauer (1995: 95–98), Salvi (2004: 50; 2005: 438–439), Bortolussi (2017), Ledgeway (2018), and Devine and Stephens (2019).

with V2. The Fin-V2 hypothesis for Early Old French addressed both these points: V1 orders previously entailing V-to-C movement alone are reanalysed as involving verb movement alongside movement of *pro* or a null operator, in order to be V2-consistent (cf. 23); V3* orders simply involve merger of further constituents to the left of the constituent which satisfies the movement diacritic on Fin (cf. 24a), whereas in the conservative VSO grammar all constituents to the left of the finite verb would have been satisfying a marked movement diacritic on a higher left-peripheral head (cf. 24b).

- (23) a. Conservative VSO Grammar \Rightarrow [_{Frame} [_{Force} [_{Topic} [_{Focus} [_{Fin} [_{Fin{+uV}} **V**][T...]]]]]]
 b. Innovative V2 Grammar \Rightarrow [_{Frame} [_{Force} [_{Topic} [_{Focus} [_{Fin} *pro/OP* [_{Fin{+uV, +EF}} **V**][T...]]]]]]
- (24) a. Conservative VSO Grammar \Rightarrow [_{Frame} (**Frame-Setter**) [_{Force} [_{Topic} (**Topic**) [_{Focus} (**Focus**) [_{Fin} [_{Fin{+uV}} **V**][T...]]]]]]
 b. Innovative V2 Grammar \Rightarrow [_{Frame} (**Frame-Setter**) [_{Force} [_{Topic} (**Topic**) [_{Focus} [_{Fin} **XP**_{V2} [_{Fin{+uV, +EF}} **V**][T...]]]]]]

We address a final point which involves looking ‘forward’ from the grammar instantiated in Early Old French verse texts to the V2 grammar found in the Later Old French period, after approximately 1225. The V2 grammar of Later Old French is acknowledged by a wide number of scholars to be descriptively stricter than the relaxed system observed in Early Old French verse (Skårup 1975; Roberts 1993: 144; Vance 1997: 61–62; Salvesen 2013; Wolfe 2016); this stricter syntax has a number of correlates, but most notably for our purposes involves a number of changes to the syntax-pragmatics mapping, heavy restrictions on the nature of V3* orders attested in the system, and the near-total absence of matrix verb-initial clauses. This bundle of changes is analysed by Rouveret (2004), Wolfe (2016; 2018a; 2021a: 116–118), and Ledgeway (2021) as involving upwards reanalysis of the V2 property such that the verb-movement trigger and phrasal movement diacritic are associated with Force, as well as Fin. Should we therefore dismiss the findings from earlier texts as being conditioned by the constraints of verse, rather than a genuinely more conservative system? We argue not on two grounds, which supplement the argumentation above: firstly, it is implausible that a Force-V2 grammar could have emerged directly from reanalysis of the output of a late/subliterary Latin and Old Sardinian grammar; as we saw, such a reanalysis would have needed to account for a large number of verb-initial and V3* orders, which are heavily restricted in a Force-V2 system. In addition, ‘upwards’ reanalysis as a general diachronic process is not only well attested in a large number of

languages (Roberts & Roussou 2002; Van Gelderen 2011; Roberts 2012; 2021a), but appears to have taken place in other V2 systems in Germanic (Walkden 2015; Roberts 2021b) and Celtic (Meelen 2016; 2020), where an innovative stricter system emerges from a conservative more relaxed one.¹⁰ We see then that even if we lacked textual evidence prior to the 13th century, we would necessarily need to reconstruct an intermediary stage between a VSO grammar and the strict Force-V2 system which is well studied for Later Old French. With this established, our assumptions about early word-order change in Latin and Romance can be summarised as in (25):

- (25) a. Reanalysis 1: SOV \Rightarrow (XP)-VSO (Classical Latin to Subliterary/Late Latin and Old Sardinian)
- b. Reanalysis 2: (XP)-VSO \Rightarrow Fin-V2 (Subliterary/Late Latin and Old Sardinian to Early Medieval Romance)
- c. Reanalysis 3: Fin-V2 \Rightarrow Force-V2 (Early Medieval Romance to some Later Medieval Romance varieties, e.g. French, some Occitan varieties,¹¹ and some Venetan varieties)

To conclude, although having a textual database for a whole period in a language's history which is heavily reliant on verse is a legitimate basis for caution, a considerable body of evidence suggests that the syntactic system attested in Early Old French verse texts is representative of a key stage in the evolution of French's clausal syntax. Adopting this hypothesis is entirely consistent with the comparative Romance evidence, permits a diachronically coherent account of the evolution of Romance and French clausal structure, and receives typological support from comparable patterns of word-order change crosslinguistically.

¹⁰ Note, this does not mean that the only attested change is Fin > Force, only that Force-V2 systems appear only to emerge from a previous Fin-V2 grammar. A number of Germanic varieties appear to be innovating more relaxed V2 grammars (Walkden 2015; Lowell Sluckin 2021), and Wolfe (2021a; 2021b) argues this also occurs in the transition from Old to Middle French.

¹¹ See Wolfe (2020) for discussion of some apparent distinctions between late medieval Occitan texts as well as Renzi, Vanelli, and Benincà (1986) who identify internal variation within Old Occitan.

3. Case-study Three: The Old Venetan corpus

The final case-study we consider here is the syntactic system attested in the Old Venetan corpus, the heterogeneity and overall significance of which is only currently coming to light. In contrast to other Medieval Romance varieties such as Old French and Old Spanish, formal syntactic studies of Old Venetan have focussed near-exclusively on a single text – *Lio Mazor* – a Venetian legal document believed to have been composed in the 14th century, between 1312 and 1314 (Benincà 1983a).¹² Data from *Lio Mazor* have been deployed in a wide range of Medieval Romance studies, most notably those of Benincà (1983b; 1995; 2004; 2006). In recent comparative work, Wolfe (2018a: chap. 3) suggests that *Lio Mazor* instantiates a relatively strict Force-V2 system, where classic V2 effects obtain but – as in Later Old French (cf. §2) – V3* triggers are heavily restricted and the distribution of *pro* is such that verb-initial matrix clauses and embedded null subjects are only rarely attested. However, if almost all major studies of several centuries of a language’s history are based on studies of a single text, this raises the question of whether an expanded corpus would yield a similar picture. Moreover, given the rich microvariation which obtains within the Veneto region today (Benincà, Parry & Pescarini 2016), one can ask whether findings for Old Venetian extend to Old Venetan in general. The need to expand the analysis of the corpus is particularly acute given one of its major shortcomings: in contrast to many other Medieval Romance varieties, the extant textual database for Old Venetan is strikingly late, meaning we have little insight into what form an Early Old Venetan grammar would have taken. Furthermore, although texts of sufficient length do exist from this late period from three of the major dialect areas – Paduan, Veronese, and Venetian – this necessarily means comparing texts of different genres. However, in the discussion that follows I will suggest that far from being grounds for dismissal, the relatively late attestation of the majority of Old Venetan texts gives provides us a unique insight into the breakdown of the V2 property and a number of the crucial changes which took place during the key transition from the medieval to the modern periods. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of the corpus is not a barrier to understanding a number of widespread changes affecting the Venetan varieties as a whole in the late medieval period. The findings presented here are based on those to appear in Poletto and Wolfe (Forthcoming); they include four texts in addition to *Lio Mazor*, which have been chosen as they are of sufficient length to permit quantitative as

¹² A recent exception is Singh (2021), who studies the *San Brendano*, another 14th-century Venetian text. His findings are broadly comparable to ours here, namely a V2 grammar with incipient V2 loss.

well as qualitative analysis and are representative of three of the major dialect areas: *Tomasin* (1336-1380) and *Serapiom* (1390) from Paduan, *Tristano* (14th century), alongside *Lio Mazor* from Venetian, and *Santa Caterina* (14th century) from Veronese.

Initial analysis of the prefield reveals a number of notable points of distinction when compared with the Old Sardinian and Old French data considered above. While all texts show extensive evidence of V2 non-subject-initial matrix declaratives (between 59.8% and 25.7% of linear verb-second orders), two particular characteristics stand out and underscore the analysis of a V2 grammar on the cusp of being lost. Firstly, the proportion of SVO to XP_{Non-Subject}-V(-S) is higher than reported for other Medieval Romance varieties,¹³ and the overall proportion of object-fronting is also low in certain texts. Consider Table 2 in this regard:

Table 2. Linear Verb Second Orders in Old Venetan

	Padua				Venice				Verona	
	<i>Tomasin</i>		<i>Serapiom</i>		<i>Tristano</i>		<i>Lio Mazor</i>		<i>Santa Caterina</i>	
Subject	39	40.2%	189	63.0%	174	58.0%	281	74.3%	165	58.1%
XP _{Non-Subject}	58	59.8%	111	37.0%	125	42.0%	97	25.7%	119	41.9%
(XP _{Obj})	2	2.1%	7	2.3%	12	4.0%	35	9.3%	33	11.6%
Total	97	100.0%	300	100.0%	300	100.0%	378	100.0%	284	100.0%

Thus, we observe variation between the texts in the overall proportion of SVO, which is as high as 74.3% in the Venetian text *Lio Mazor* but as low as 40.2% in the Paduan text *Tomasin*. The proportion of direct and indirect object fronting does not seem directly related to the proportion of SVO, as here we find that *Lio Mazor* has the second-highest proportion at 9.3% (cf. 26), whereas the proportion for both Paduan texts and the *Tristano* appears especially low.

(26) A me li-deré vu!
to me.CL them.CL=give.2PL.FUTyou
‘You’ll give them to me!’

¹³ For discussion of comparative Romance and Germanic data on this point, see in particular Wolfe (2018a: 24–26). Although there are reasons to be sceptical of direct comparison of this historical Germanic data and the Romance data presented here, Lightfoot (1995: 41) suggests that SVO matrix clauses should not constitute greater than 70% of the input relative to their non-subject-initial counterparts. If we were to adopt this figure, only *Lio Mazor* would fall 4.3% above it.

These quantitative observations sit alongside an important qualitative one about the nature of the prefield across the texts: while there is variation between them, no text presents compelling evidence for a highly active focus layer hosting informationally focussed constituents. Instead, we find fronting of QPs only (cf. 27), and one example of apparent contrastive focus in *Lio Mazor* (28), in addition to that in (26):

(27) E tuto questo li ha fato una damisela
 and all this him.CL have.3SG do.PTCP a woman

‘And a young woman has done all this to him’ (Old Venetian, Tristano 20)

(28) A t’ acusarò
 to you accuse.1SG.FUT

‘I will accuse you’ (Old Venetian, Lio Mazor 50)

Turning to the topic layer, while not the case in Paduan, in both Venetian and Veronese, topicalised PP and DP objects appear to be restricted to referring to entities which are already active in the preceding text and typically have a morphosyntactic exponent of anaphoricity, as in (29):

(29) a. Ma questo te digo ben
 but this you.CL tell.1SG as-well

‘But I’ll tell you this as well’ (Old Veronese, Santa Caterina 752)

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, Tristano 26)

The overall conclusion is therefore that a far wider range of constituents can occupy the prefield that we might expect in an SVO system, but the texts appear to instantiate a stage of incipient V2 loss, where the constituents able to satisfy the V2-related diacritic is increasingly restricted. One constituent which can, however, satisfy V2 in some of the texts is the particle *SI*, which we saw in §3 was also licensed in Old French. Unlike in Later Old French, however, in all the texts except *Lio Mazor* *SI* is found alongside initial subjects (Wolfe 2022a):

(30) a. Questo sì è lo megior amigo che io abia al
 this SI be.3SG the best friend that I have.1SG.SBJV in-the
 mondo
 world

‘This is the best friend that I have in the world’ (Old Venetian, Tristano 3)

b. Lo prévede sì dis
 the priest SI say.3SG.PST
 The priest said’ (Old Veronese, Santa Caterina 196)

c. Gluten sì è la colla...
 gluten SI be.3SG the glue
 ‘Gluten is the glue...’ (Old Paduan, Serapiom 176)

In purely descriptive terms what is perhaps most striking about clauses such as (30) is that they yield V3* patterns of a kind not licensed within strict V2 systems crosslinguistically, and – in fact – not licensed in *Lio Mazor*. When we look more closely at other V3* patterns (31), we also observe that *Lio Mazor* stands out for its strictness, suggesting that Old Paduan and Old Veronese and plausibly other Venetian varieties were ‘relaxed’ Fin-V2 grammars at the stage attested in the text:

(31) a. Ella sempre tene un so fijolo in braço |
 she always hold.3SG a her child in arm
 ‘She always holds her child in her arms’ (Old Veronese, Santa Caterina 36)

b. Tristan, lo qual era in palazo, quando elo
 Tristan the which be.3sg.pst in palace when he
 vete che tuti demenava gran duol, ello
 see.3SG.PST that all bear.3SG.PST great pain he
 comença a domendar che questo era
 begin.3SG.PST to ask.INF what this 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)

Finally, consider inversion. Although all the texts show the key V2 correlate of inversion (32), Germanic inversion (Roberts 1993: 56; Salvesen & Bech 2014; Poletto 2014: 3–8; Wolfe 2018a), where the subject unambiguously occupies a TP-internal position with the verb in C, as

in (33), appears infrequent across the texts, though this is yet to be verified in a tagged corpus. If this observation is shown to hold it is indicative of a further restriction on a core V2 correlate in the Old Venetan corpus.

(32) e così er' e' rivà a casa de Macho de Robin
 and so be.3SG=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)

(33) A queste cose stipulame(n)tre sù p(ro)mete el dicto Andrea
 to these things agreed sù promise.3SG.PST the said Andrea
 'The said Andrea promised in relation to these agreed points...' (Old Paduan, Tomasin 42)

Our overall proposal is that despite the Old Venetan corpus being far from homogeneous and late in its composition for the majority of texts, a number of generalisations can be reached which are significant for an account of Romance word-order change. Firstly, it appears that the grammar instantiated in *Lio Mazor* is distinct from the other Old Venetan grammars and – in most respects – this correlates with being markedly ‘stricter’, and thus analysable in formal terms as a Force-V2 system; methodologically, this highlights the pitfalls of basing an analysis of the grammar of a ‘language’ on a single text. Secondly, all the texts offer evidence of what might be termed incipient V2 loss. At least four characteristics of the texts considered here lead to a renewed understanding of why evidence for the V2 property might have been undermined for acquirers:

(i). **The Prefield.** Contrary to what we observed for Early Old French, and what is reported for a wide range of other Old Italo-Romance varieties (Benincà 2004; Ledgeway 2007; 2008; Cruschina 2011; Poletto 2014), Old Venetan varieties do not present clear evidence that they can license left-peripheral information foci, although a restricted class of QP-fronting is fully productive. This narrowing of the class of left-peripheral constituents which can satisfy V2 is also mirrored in the topic layer, where fronted objects appear to be pronominal or discourse-anaphoric nominals. Relatedly, the proportion of SVO in certain texts is sufficiently high that the grammar could plausibly be reconstructed as close to a ‘tipping point’ where acquirers would reanalyse the input as an SVO grammar with V-to-T movement, as opposed to V-to-Fin.

(ii). **Expletives.** All the texts, bar *Lio Mazor*, present compelling evidence that SI is strongly favoured as a strategy to satisfy V2, even in the presence of an overt nominal subject. This pattern sits alongside widespread attestation of expletive *ello*, not discussed here, which

is analysed by Garzonio (2021) as satisfying V2 as a form of last-resort strategy in a number of Old Venetan texts. Why initial subjects themselves cannot apparently satisfy V2 in these cases remains puzzling, but the frequent occurrence of these expletive constituents leads to a decline in XP-movement to the left periphery and thus undermines some of the evidence for a V2 analysis of the data.

(iii). **V3 Clauses.** Although liberal licensing of V3* orders is fully compatible with the V2 property in various contemporary and historical V2 languages (Petrova 2012; Walkden 2015; Meelen 2016; Wolfe 2016; Greco & Haegeman 2020; Lowell Sluckin 2021), it may be that Old Venetan varieties show a problematic combination of clauses such as (31) which could be reanalysed as underlyingly SVO, while also showing insufficiently robust evidence of XP-fronting and V-to-C movement which are integral to a V2 analysis on the part of acquirers. The hypothesis to test in future work would therefore be that Fin-V2 is rendered unstable by liberal V3* licensing only if other factors undermine evidence for XP-fronting and V-to-C movement which might otherwise ‘outweigh’ this evidence could point to an SVO grammar.

(iv). **Inversion.** As noted above, detailed quantitative work is still needed in this area on the basis of a tagged corpus, but insufficiently robust proportions of postverbal subjects, and in particular those in Germanic-inversion contexts, would further undermine a crucial piece of data pointing to a grammar with V-to-Fin or -Force movement.

Although the texts considered here, and others which are beyond the scope of this article, show microvariation in certain low-level properties, the pervasive characteristic of Old Venetan texts is thus of a grammar which remains V2, albeit an unstable V2 system whose later breakdown can already be understood. Although the absence of earlier Venetan texts undoubtedly undermines our understanding of the evolution of Venetan varieties, the texts we do have nevertheless offer a fundamental insight into the final stages of the V2 grammar of many Northern Italo-Romance varieties. Though it may be tempting to dismiss these findings on the basis of the seemingly problematic corpus used, we should note that properties (i-iv) identified above are also argued to characterise the ‘dying’ V2 grammar of Middle French by a number of scholars (Roberts 1993; Vance 1995; 1997; Vance, Donaldson & Steiner 2009; Wolfe 2021b). Moreover, we would expect the loss of V2 crosslinguistically to correlate with factors that conspire to undermine the evidence for the two central components of a V2 syntax: XP-fronting to satisfy a movement diacritic on Fin or Force, and verb movement to satisfy a verbal Probe on one or both of these heads. The later Old Venetan evidence is entirely consistent with this hypothesis.

4. Conclusions

In this article we aim to have shown that texts which may appear philologically problematic can, upon close consideration, provide valuable insights for theories of syntactic change. Our principal focus has been upon three sets of texts, each of which has its own challenges: the Old Sardinian *condaghes*, a potentially formulaic set of legal texts; Old French verse, which could be interpreted as unrepresentative of the earliest stages of the language; and the Old Venetan corpus, itself potentially too heterogeneous in terms of text-type and late in terms of composition to provide valuable insights into the history of Venetan varieties. In each case, we have suggested that some of the challenges can be overcome if both direct and indirect evidence is used to support or undermine hypotheses. Furthermore, we have proposed that the Old Sardinian, Early Old French verse, and Old Venetan texts considered map onto important diachronic (sub)-periods in the syntactic evolution of the Romance languages: the grammar instantiated in the Old Sardinian *condaghes* features ‘half’ of the V2 constraint, with V-to-Fin movement, but no requirement for phrasal merger in the C-domain; Early Old French verse instantiates a ‘relaxed’ Fin-V2 grammar, which is found across the earliest attestations of the Early Medieval Romance languages; and the Old Venetan texts share that they provide evidence of incipient V2 loss, though *Lio Mazor* stands out as a stricter Force-V2 system, in contrast to the other texts which are representative of grammars where the locus of V2 appears to be Fin. The main empirical findings of this article are schematised in Table 3:

Table 3. Word Order Change through Texts

Grammar A	Grammar B	Grammar C	Grammar D
VSO	Relaxed V2	Strict V2	Incipient V2 Loss
Old Sardinian Late and Subliterary Latin	Early Old French Verse (Old Southern and Central Italo-Romance)	Later Old French Prose	Later Old Venetan (Middle French)
V-to-Fin	V-to-Fin	V-to-Force	V-to-Fin/Force
Active Focus Field	Active Focus Field	Restrictions on Focus	Heavy Restrictions on Focus
Active Topic Field	Active Topic Field	Active Topic Field	Heavy Restrictions on Object Topicalisation
Widespread V3*	Widespread V3*	Restricted V3*	Widespread V3*
Unmarked V1	Marked V1	Restricted Marked V1	Restricted Marked V1
G- and R-Inversion	G- and R-Inversion	G- and R-Inversion	Low Attestation of G- and R-Inversion

Even though this article may read as a positivist take on the myriad problems the historical syntactician faces when dealing with problematic textual evidence,¹⁴ caution should be sounded in two key respects: firstly, the Romance case-studies presented here show us the particular importance of considering a wide range of direct and indirect supporting or conflicting evidence when forming hypotheses about the grammar of a language only instantiated in texts which are in some way restricted; in particular, hypotheses should be stress-tested against typological criteria, synchronic comparison with languages for which we have more complete textual records, and diachronic plausibility, both in terms of parent and daughter languages living or dead, and relevant principles of syntactic change. In this respect, ‘reconstructing’ the grammars of languages with problematic textual histories bears some resemblances to reconstruction proper for languages where no texts exist at all.¹⁵

Secondly, although the texts analysed in this article have been described as being representative of particular ‘periods’ in a language’s history the mapping between a linguistic period and particular dating should at best be considered indirect.¹⁶ That is to say that although the Old Sardinian *condaghes* and Early Old French verse should rightly be viewed as instantiations of real grammatical systems employed by native speakers of the respective varieties, this does not necessarily mean that the system represents contemporary usage at the time of composition. As such, if comprehensively motivated on comparative, diachronic, and typological grounds, a schema showing diachronic progression of the type in Table 3 should be interpreted as showing the successive progression of grammars as instantiated textually, rather than implying a direct mapping onto what might have been observed in speech.

Overall, this article has sought to show that formal diachronic syntax is not a priori incompatible with poor-quality textual evidence. In fact, such evidence – handled with appropriate caution – can bring to light patterns of variation and change which would otherwise go overlooked.

¹⁴ On which, see in particular the contributions in Herring, Van Reenen, and Schøsler (2000) and Kiss (2005).

¹⁵ For discussion of the importance of typological and diachronic plausibility in linguistic reconstruction, see amongst many others Campbell (2013: 107–158), Hale (2007), Roberts (2021a: 500–529), Willis (2011), and Walkden (2013).

¹⁶ See Lass (2000) and Smith (2002) for important takes on this point.

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