

Beyond grammaticalization: a diachronic constructional approach to Dutch *be*-verbs

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Introduction: *be*-verbs

The prefix *be-*

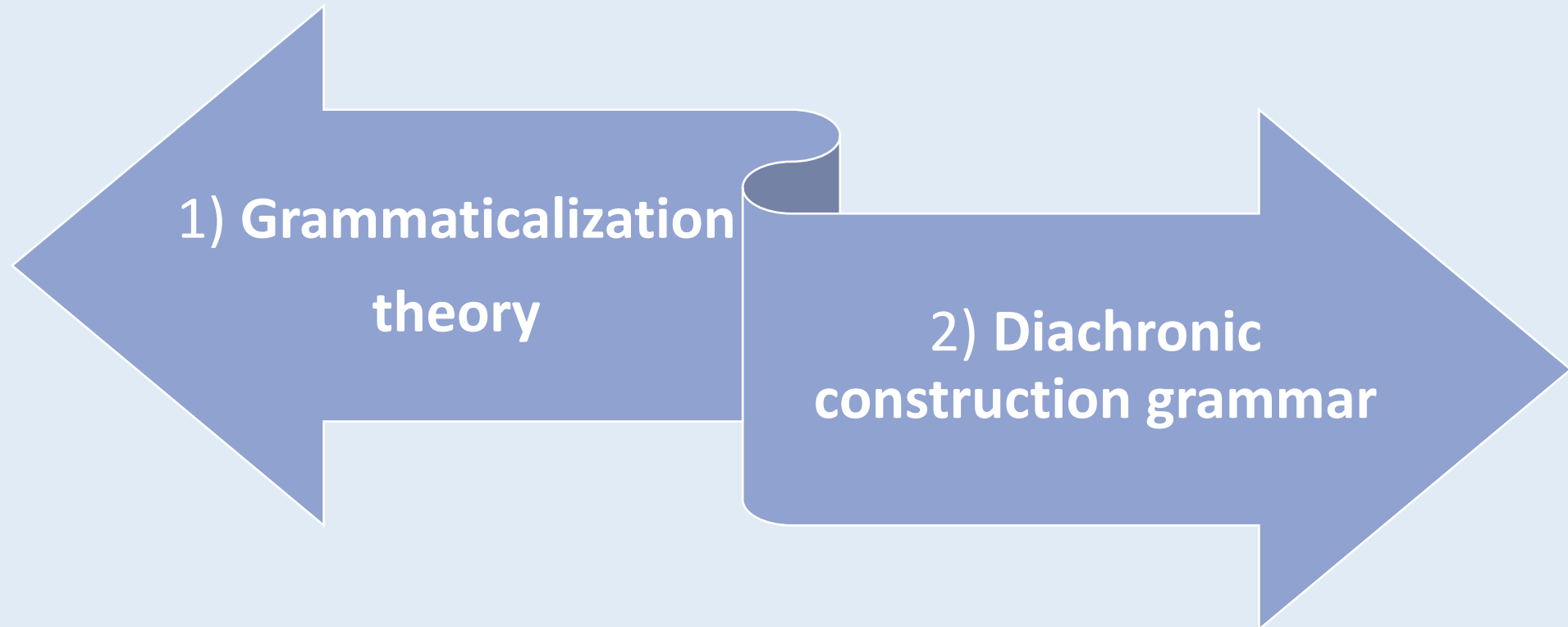
- Germanic prefix to derive new verbs: [*be-V*]_V (de Haas & Trommelen 1993; Booij 2022)
- (almost) always creates transitive verbs (de Haas & Trommelen 1993; Booij 2022; Vrielynck et al. in press)

e.g., *De dappere alpinisten klimmen op de berg.* ('The brave alpinists **climb** up the mountain')
mountain')

e.g., *De dappere alpinisten beklimmen de berg.* ('The brave alpinists **be-climb** the mountain')
mountain')

- Semantics and diachrony → remain debated

2 frameworks



1) Grammaticalization theory

- Focus on the prefix
- Very old grammaticalization process: lexical item → morphosyntactic item
- Formal: **ambi < bij < bi < be* (Philippa et al. 2003-2009)
- Semantic bleaching: ‘by, around’ (Philippa et al. 2003-2009) → no meaning/purely grammatical (Norde & Van Goethem 2015: 126)

2) Diachronic construction grammar

Meaning of *be*-verbs?

- **Construction grammar** framework (Goldberg 1995; 2006)
 - Instantiation of (specific?) transitive construction
 - ! Important: situating within broader constructional network (Diessel 2019, 2023) & in relation to neighbouring constructions (Cappelle 2005)
 - Affectedness and/or telicity? (de Haas & Trommelen 1993: 67; Audring 2015; De Vries & te Winkel 1851)

Meaning of *be*-verbs (2)

! Counterexamples

Affectedness

e.g., *Hij **plant** bloemen in zijn tuin.* ('He plants flowers in his garden.')

vs.

e.g., *Hij **beplant** zijn tuin met bloemen.* (lit. 'He *be*-plants his garden with flowers.')

→ **entire** garden is covered

! Very vague notion with methodological difficulties (Lenci 2012: 14; Dąbrowska 2017: 21-38; Pijpops 2019: 45-46) → too imprecise to capture differences between variants

Telicity

e.g., *Hij **klimt** op de berg.* ('He climbs up the mountain')

vs.

e.g., *Hij **beklimt** de berg.* ('He *be*-climbs the mountain')

→ *be-klimmen* implies reaching an **endpoint** (e.g. the top of the mountain) (De Vries & te Winkel 1851)

2) Diachronic CxG

- Diachronic shifts within constructicon? (Sommerer & Smirnova 2020)
- Context: case loss → prepositional constructions and transitivity prefixes such as *be-* as ‘compensation strategies’ (Van de Velde 2004, 2014)
- Changing semantics/distribution of *be*-construction?

Case study

Case study

- **Goal:** identify factors determining distribution between *be*-verb and base verb
 - **RQ1:** What factors determine the distribution between a *be*-verb and its corresponding base verb?
 - **RQ2:** Do the factors at play display diachronic stability or have they changed over time?

Corpus data

< three diachronic corpora (big, lexically varied & relatively well dated)

1) Corpus of Middle Dutch (Dutch Language Institute 2022)

- Poetry and prose
- 1300-1550
- 7,711,005 tokens

2) EDGeS-corpus (Bouma et al. 2020)

- Bible translations
- 1360-1939
- 9,126,714 tokens

3) Subset of DBNL (following Van Olmen 2019)

- Literary texts
- 1500-2000
- 9,766,040 tokens

Pilot study of *beclimb* vs. *climb*

- *Beklimmen* ('be-climb') vs. *klimmen op* ('climb on') (both already in Middle Dutch period)

→ Transitive construction vs. intransitive construction + adjunct 'on'

Cf. *De dappere alpinisten klimmen op de berg*. ('The brave alpinists **climb** up the mountain')

vs. *De dappere alpinisten beklimmen de berg*. ('The brave alpinists **be-climb** the mountain')

Data extraction

→ extracting all attestations of both verbs

→ selecting the relevant attestations (*beclimb* + direct object & *climb* + 'on')

Period	<i>Beklimmen</i>	<i>Klimmen op</i>	Total
Before 1500	13 (9,15%)	129 (90,85%)	142 (100%)
1501-1700	57 (15,41%)	313 (84,59%)	370 (100%)
1701-1900	79 (69,30%)	35 (30,70%)	114 (100%)
1901-2000	77 (50,66%)	75 (49,34%)	152 (100%)
Total	226 (29,05%)	552 (70,95%)	778 (100%)

Annotation

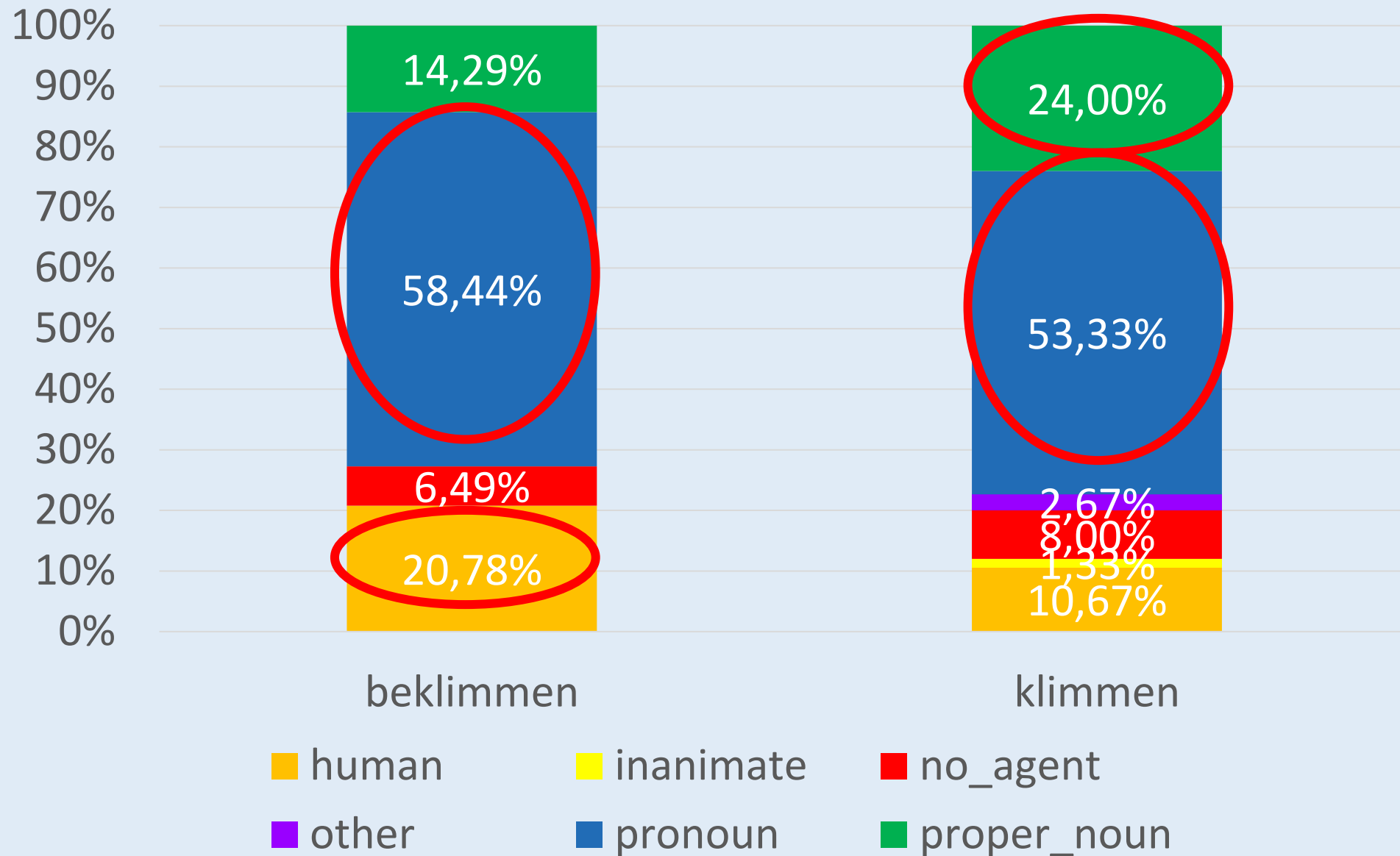
- **Hypothesis:** *be*-verbs correlate with higher degrees of transitivity
 - parameters of 'high transitivity' (cf. Hopper and Thompson 1980: 252)
 - Affirmation: **positive** vs. negative
 - Mode: **realis** vs. irrealis
 - **Agency** of agent & agency of patient: < animacy hierarchy (Silverstein 1976)
 - Patient: **concrete** vs. abstract noun, number (**sg.** vs. **pl.**), **definite** vs. indefinite
 - verb tense (**present** = foregrounding → *be*-)
 - **main clause** vs. subordinate clause (**main clause** = foregrounding → *be*)
 - word order (patient_verb, verb_patient)

Results of most recent period

- **No/small differences**
 - Affirmation: both >90% positive attestations
 - Concreteness patient: both >97% concrete
 - Definiteness patient: both >74% definite
 - Agency patient: both >74% inanimate patients (*climb* bit more human patients (10%))
 - Mode: both >87% no modal verb (*beclimb* bit more modals (12,99%))
 - Number patient: both >80% sg (*beclimb* bit more plural (19,48%))

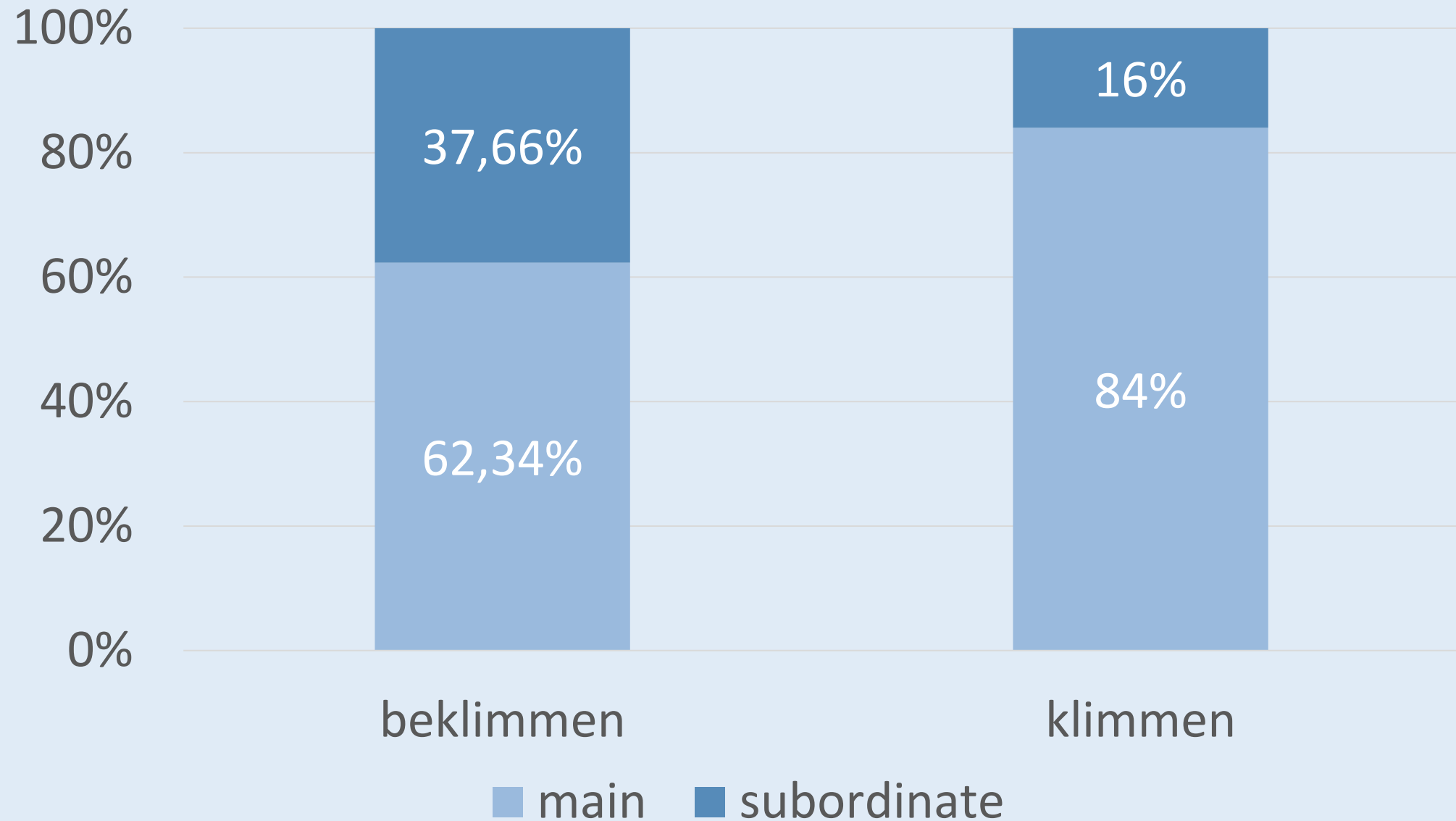
Agency agent

✗ Against hypothesis

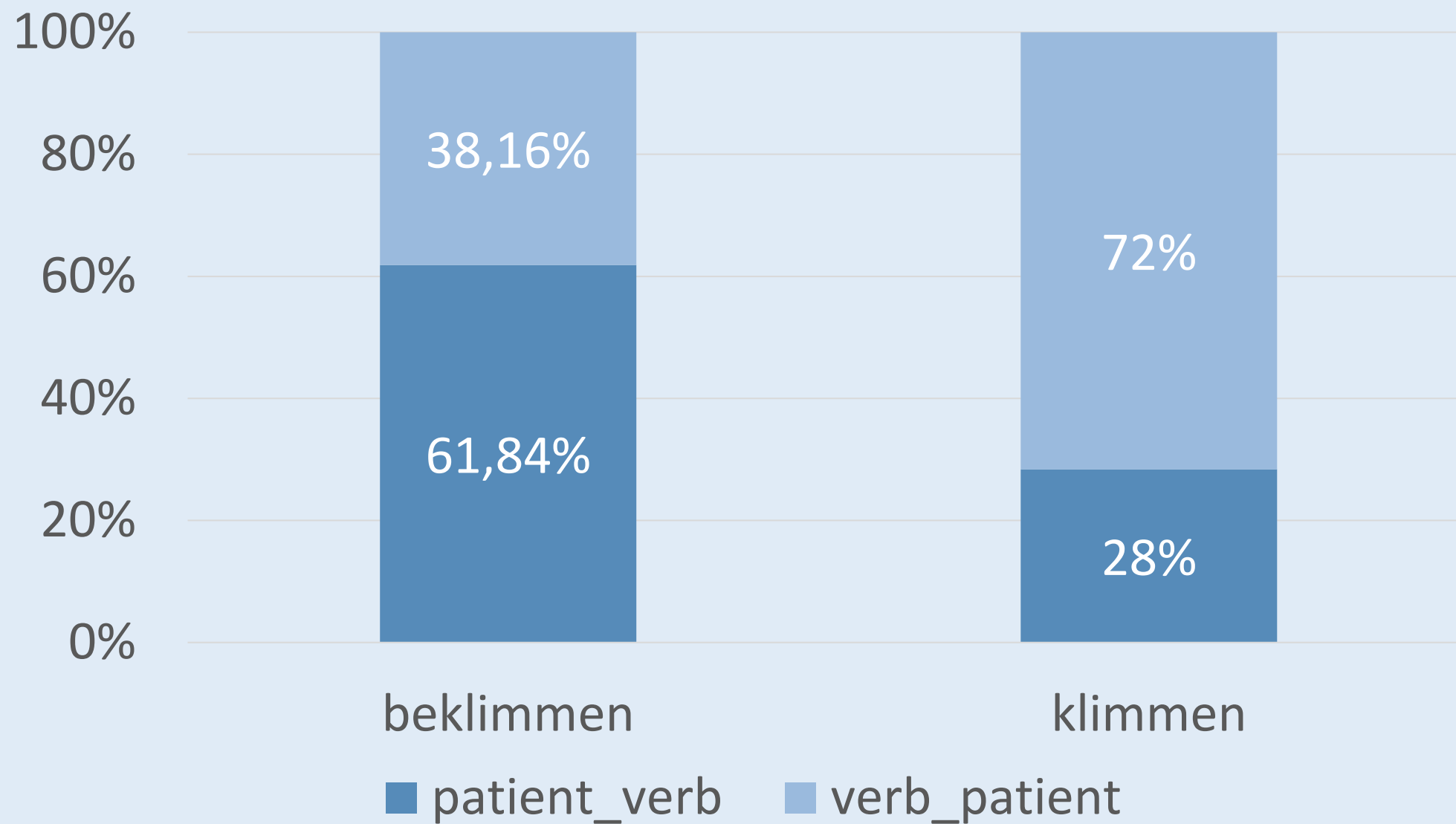


Main/subordinate clause

✗ Against hypothesis



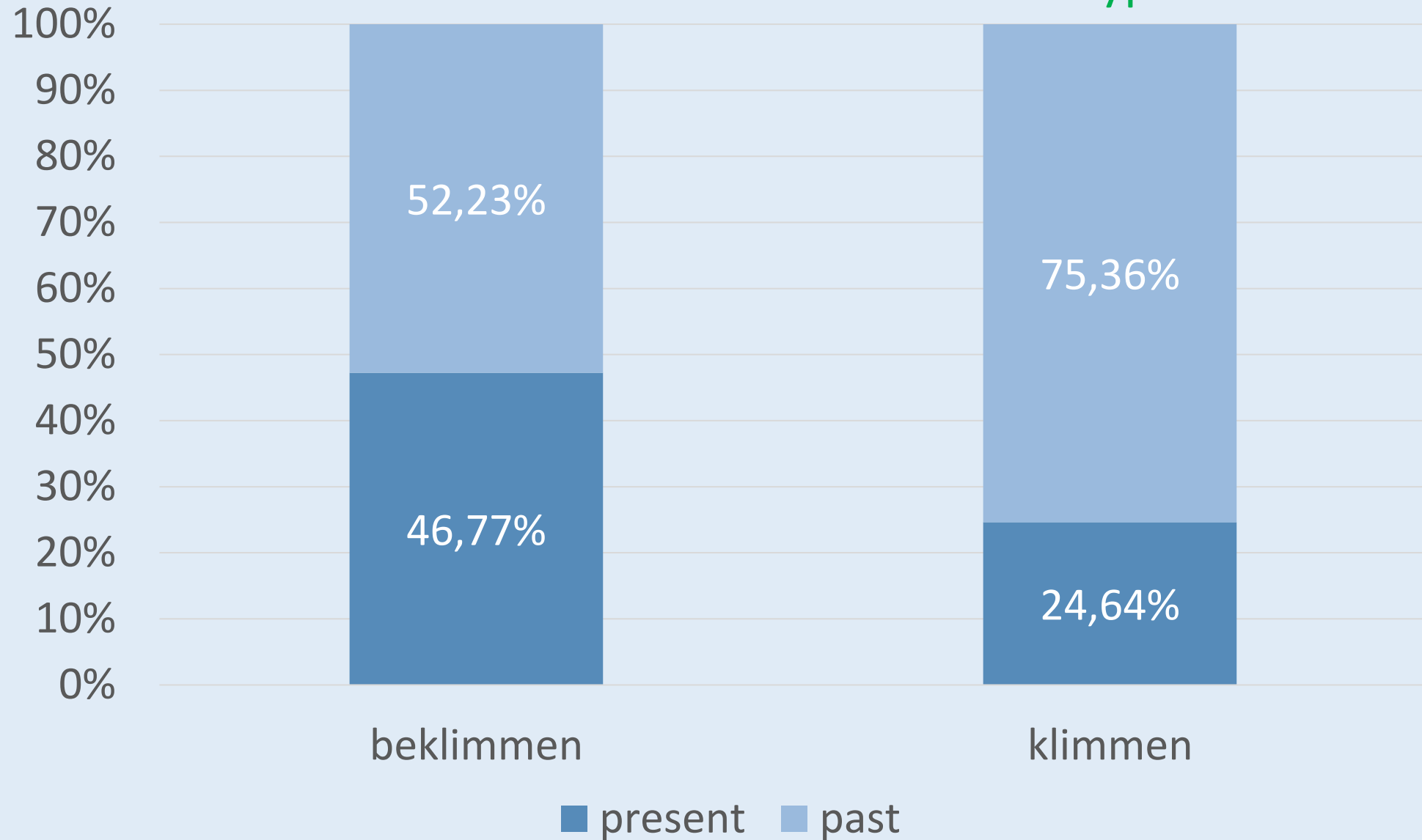
Word order



Verb tense



In line with hypothesis



Interim conclusion (RQ1)

- *Be*-verb influenced by factors typical for transitivity/foregrounding: e.g., present tense

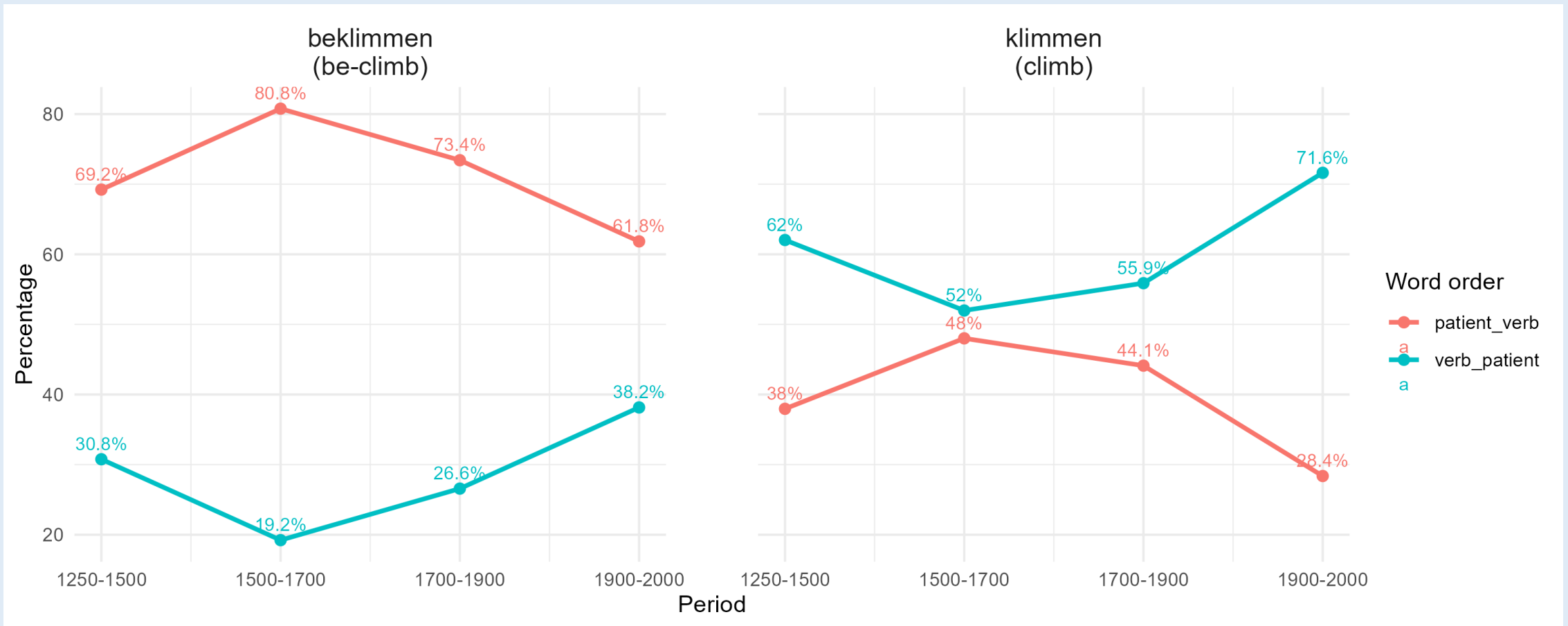
as well as by

- atypical factors: e.g., subordinate clause, agency agent

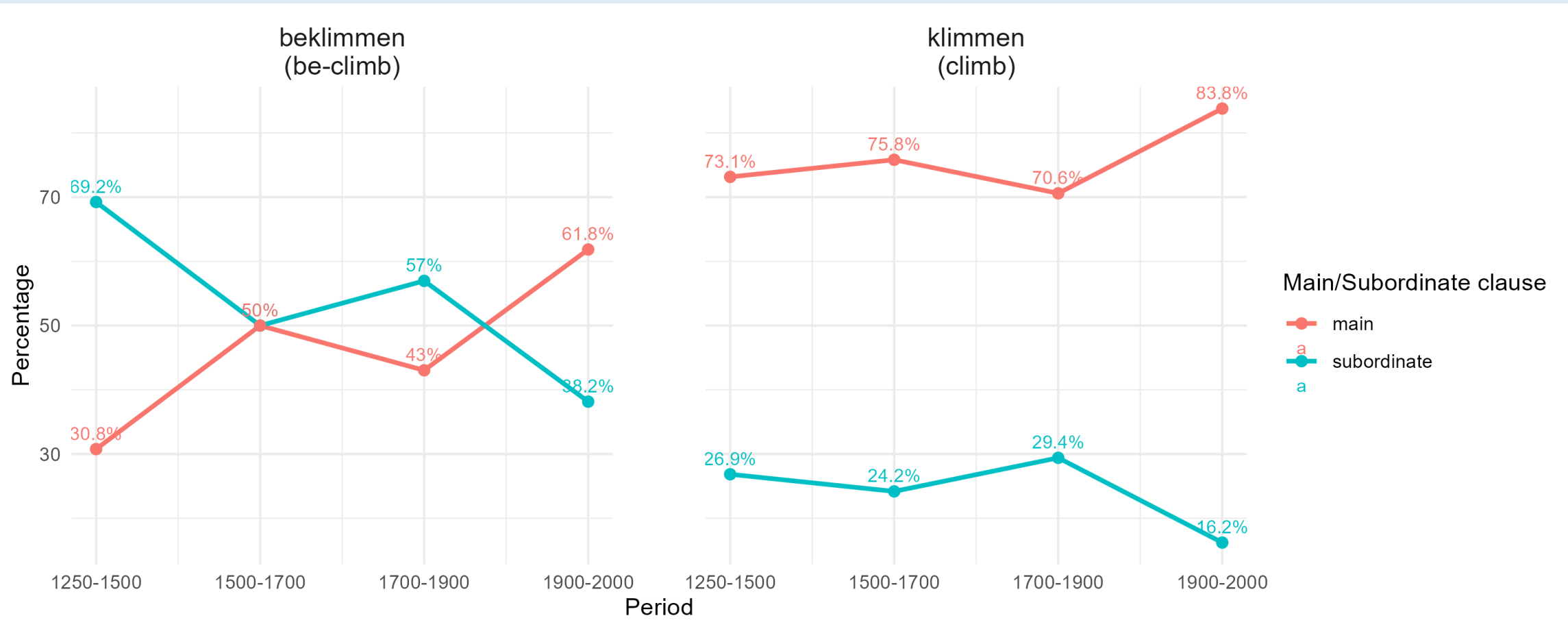
→ specific *be*-construction?

→ + evolution of factors? (RQ2)

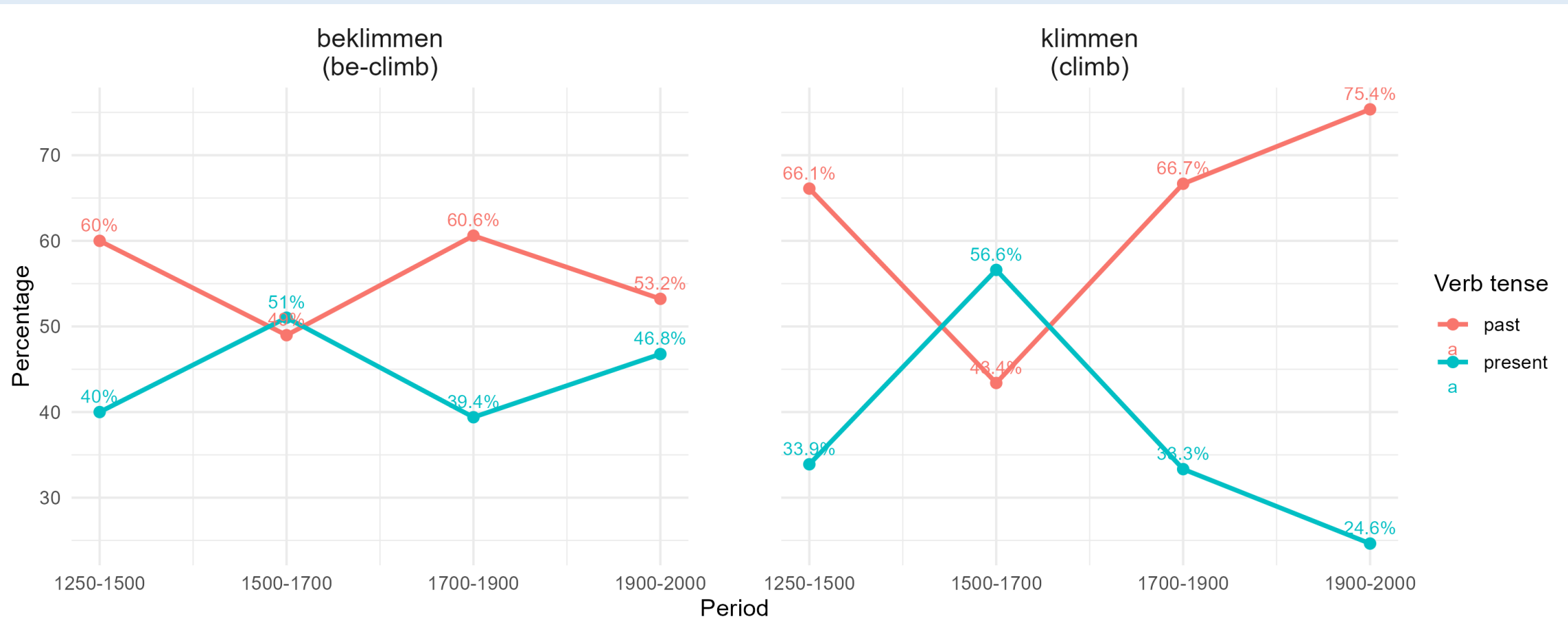
Evolution of word order



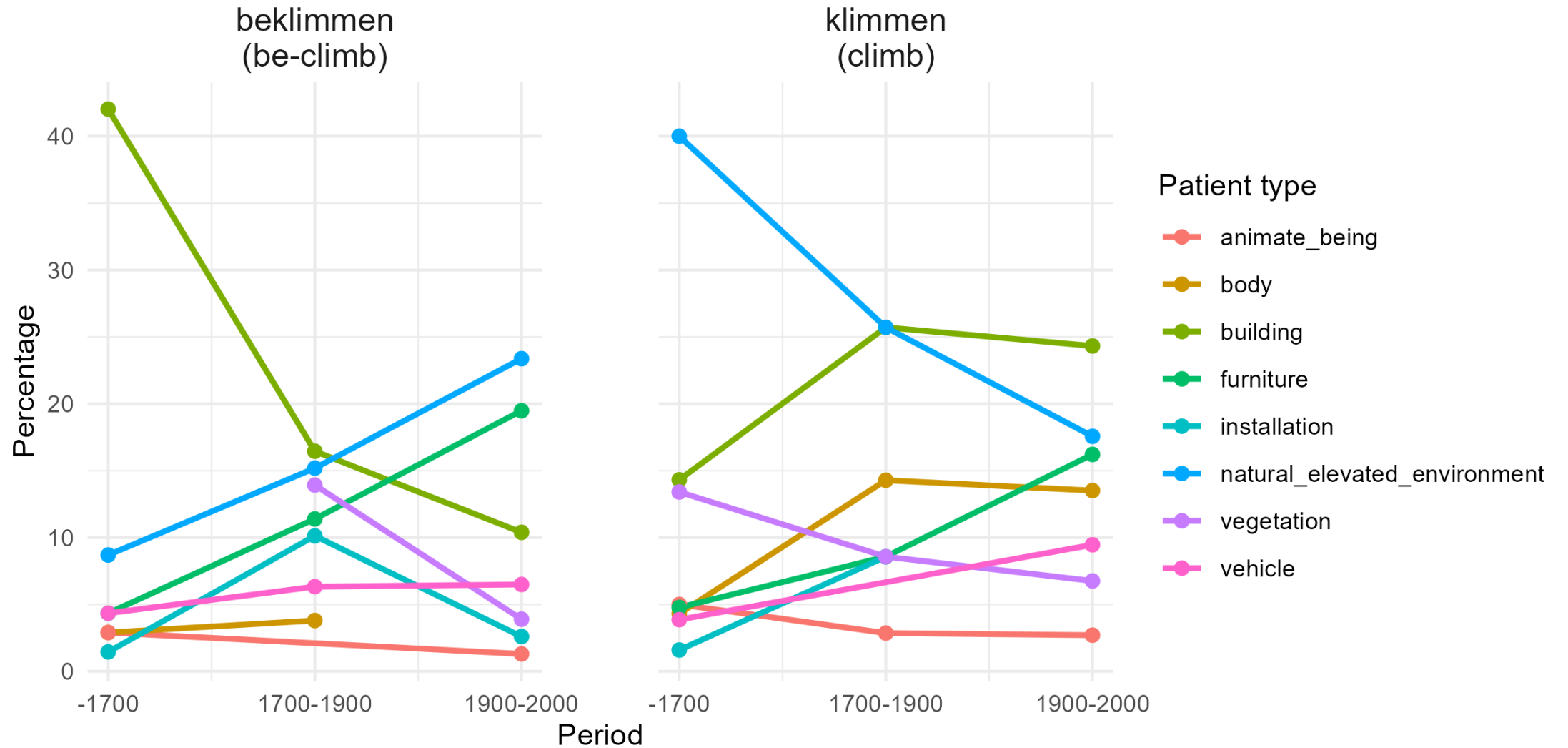
Evolution of main/subordinate clause



Evolution of verb tense



Evolution of patient type



Interim conclusion (RQ2)

- **Syntactically**
 - *Beklimmen* allows for more variation
 - *Klimmen* has clearer syntactic preferences (e.g., main clause, past tense)
→ but: not many major changes over time
- **Semantically** (i.e., patient type)
 - Both variants undergo change in patient preference

Discussion

- **Factors** determining distribution between *beklimmen* and *klimmen op*?
 - Mainly: agency agent, main/subordinate clause, word order & verb tense (not everything in line with hypothesis)
 - **Only subtle changes** (*beklimmen* allowing for more variation, *klimmen* for less variation) + shifts in patient type (semantics))
 - **2 complementary frameworks**
 - 1) Prefix *be-* as grammaticalized *ambi
 - 2) But: '*be-verb*' is not just a base verb with a transitivizing marker devoid of meaning since choice for *be-verb* is also determined by factors not necessarily linked to foregrounding/transitivity
- constructional comparison between prefixed and non-prefixed variant: more nuanced/complete account on meaning/development

Thank you!

Questions?

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