

## WORD ORDER AND THE COMMUNICATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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O. Traditionally word order studies have either gone towards descriptive-typological research, or otherwise stayed in the sphere of theoretical speculations about factors of different linguistic provenience underlying this phenomenon. Needless to say only the latter stand appears plausible and promising for any generalizations on the often conflicting communicative and grammatical strategies. Nonetheless some findings within the descriptive-comparative tradition cannot be neglected here since they evidently support the claim that functional considerations should not be totally excluded from analyses of word order variations in and among languages.

The present paper aims at a critical evaluation of the basic trends in word order studies from the point of view of their relevance to the stand adopted here, according to which word order is the final outcome of an interplay of under-surface communicative preferences and grammatical options. In other words, it speaks in favour of a deeper insight into word order problems, going much beyond the surface ordering of such grammatical categories as S, V, O, in order to make possible the discovery of a variety of semantic and pragmatic factors at work in the process of communication.

Since it is postulated that the study of word order should be conceived of as a search for a linguistic explanation of the basic communicative lay-out of the sentence, what comes first is the question of how communicative and grammatical priorities and limitations are reconciled in the system of a particular language, or how a given language responds to genuine communicative principles.

1.1. The descriptive-typological approach meets the need for some systematization of the basic syntactic patterns in different languages and — owing to its interest in the organization of exotic and unexplored languages — can be considered a constructive extension of the boundaries of linguistic know-

ledge. It may not, however, give an answer to how the overall system of a particular language matches general principles of information transmission. Nor can it uncover the meaning and communicative function of respective strings of grammatical categories. By and large such an orientation definitely loses from sight the semantic and pragmatic determinants of an act of verbal communication.

In general the "surface" explanation of word order phenomena has proved too shallow to account for the multiplicity of linguistic and non-linguistic factors involved. The understanding that problems of word order surpass considerably the surface sequence of such syntactic units as S, V, O, was noted already among followers of the descriptive-typological tradition. It found its expression in an evident drift of such studies towards the inclusion of topic-comment considerations, and culminated in a number of impressive papers on problems of topicalization and subjecthood in different languages. The following section will take a look at some of the findings in favour of the semantico-pragmatic approach to word order phenomena as postulated in the present paper.

1.2. The descriptivist-comparativist tradition had its foundation in Greenberg's well-known implicational universals laid forward in his article "Some universals of grammar with a particular reference to the order of meaningful elements" (Greenberg, 1966). Working along the same lines Lehmann (Lehmann 1972) reduced his concept of *basic order* to the *basic verb position* finally to make a distinction between V-final (OV) and all other (VO) languages. Once all the word order properties were related to the basic verb position, the verb-object construction became the fundamental pattern, which in consequence led to inspiring generalizations about the operand-operator regularities in different languages.

Following similar lines Bartsch and Vennemann (Vennemann 1974a, b) formulated their *Principle of Natural Serialization* which can be condensed into a statement that languages tend to be consistent within their XV or VX type, where XV and VX replace Lehmann's OV and VO respectively, and X stands essentially for the verb complement. With the help of this principle far reaching generalizations about constituent orderings in syntactic groups were made and supported by exemplifications from a vast sample of languages.

However, most interesting for the purpose of the present investigations remains their assumption that the history of Western Indo-European languages is an illustration of a gradual shift from XV to VX character to be attributed to the ensuing topicalization problems. Evidence is claimed to have come from languages such as Old English, earlier Romance languages, and German throughout its history — all of which represent intermediate stages of the change. For the description of such language types the intro-

duction of the concept of topic proved necessary; languages intermediate between the SXV and SVX patterns were given the label TVX where T stands for *topic*. The point was that such languages admit the occurrence not only of subjects but also of other topical material before the finite verb, e.g., the Romance proclitic object pronouns and adverbs for which there were parallels in earlier English yet there are not any now. In this way the study of word order change supplied interesting evidence how communicative strategies may affect grammatical changes within a language structure.

1.3. The introduction of topicalization problems to traditional word order typologies gave a spur to a closer examination of word order phenomena, yet this time with regard being paid to their dependence on some semantic and pragmatic factors.

The first problem to attract attention was that of subjecthood and its surface manifestations in different languages. At this point Chafe (Chafe 1976) made it quite clear that languages differ in the prominence they give to subjecthood. If in English Subject indisputably plays the crucial syntactic role, then, e.g., in Dakota, the agreement within the verb is determined by case status rather than subjecthood; the subject is reflected either by *-wa* (with this prefix being used in the verb for agreement with 1 person singular agent) or by *-mā* (in case of 1 person singular patient).

The verification of the notion of subjecthood, its status in the overall structure of different languages and implications thereof for the treatment of word order has led Li and Thompson (Li, ed., 1976) to a number of revealing statements. They have claimed among other things that although there appear to be ways of identifying subjects in most of the languages studied by them, yet not all of them have the subject-predicate construction. Interestingly enough, they all happen to respond to topic-comment bipartition. In conclusion Li says: "Our typological claim will simply be that some languages can be more insightfully described by taking the concept of topic<sup>1</sup> to be basic while others can be more insightfully described by taking the notion of subject as basic. This is due to the fact that many structural phenomena of a language can be explained on the basis of whether the basic structure of its sentences is analyzed as subject-predicate or topic-comment."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> At this point it should be mentioned that *topic* here is not quite parallel to its interpretation according to, e.g., the Prague School of FSP. To quote Chafe (Chafe, 1976: 50): "topic appears to limit the applicability of the main predication to a certain restricted domain (...). Typically, it would seem, the topic sets a spatial, temporal, or individual framework within which the main predication holds". In the above interpretation it operates in structures alien to English, of the type: As for music, I prefer jazz.

<sup>2</sup> As for topic-prominent languages, e.g., Chinese (partly), Lahu-Burmese, Lisu-Burmese, *Topic* and *Subject* are kept distinct. Such languages favour structures which have no parallels in English. Paraphrases as below are the closest we can come to: a. Mandarin.

(Li, 1976:460) They called such languages subject-prominent and topic-prominent respectively, postulating at the same time a new language typology with the two above types at opposite extremes. Sentence structure in subject-prominent languages favours a description in which the subject-predicate relation plays a major role: topic and subject are often indistinct.

The apparent simplicity of the SVO type languages, if compared to those with topic prominence, was noted much earlier in an interesting article by Halliday (Halliday, 1970), who pointed to the multiplicity of functions performed by the subject. He differentiated between the logical, the grammatical (surface), and the psychological subject of the sentence, with the last one identified separately according to either topicalization rules or information focus. The operation with syntactic categories with regard to word order phenomena proves thus to be of limited applicability only.

1.4. On the whole, what is implied by the concept of topic-subject prominence — even in its present fairly tentative version — is the inescapability from topicalization problems in a thorough study of word order differences. It is claimed that primary interest should be paid to considerations about *how* successive positions in a sentence are filled, with *how* being interpreted not in terms of grammatical categories of respective words, but with regard to their cognitive and communicative qualities. Freedom with which one language admits word reorderings within its sentences and heavy constraints laid by another one on its linear sequences can be best accounted for in a study of why and how priorities called forth by communicative processes compete with those dictated by the grammatical rigour of a given language system. In this respect evidence coming from better known languages will prove much more insightful and reliable.

2.1. In comparison to orderly descriptive typologies, theoretical studies have not developed into a systematic theory of word order regularities and dependencies. Nonetheless they have produced a number of interesting observations on, primarily, either the semantic or the pragmatic side of the phenomenon. On the one hand it was the intriguing question of the relation between thought and language and, on the other, the reflection of pragmatic factors in the way in which language reorders its surface constituents. The only attempt at some systematization here was launched by Otto Behaghel (Vennemann 1974a) and Otto Jespersen (Scaglione 1972, Jespersen 1909—49). In his first law Behaghel said that what belongs together mentally (semantically) is placed close together (syntactically). Similarly Jespersen in his

Chinese: Those trees (T), the trunks are big; b. Lahu-Burmese: This field (T), the rice is very good. For further information on subject-prominent, topic-prominent, both-subject-and-topic-prominent, and neither-subject-nor-topic-prominent languages see Li, ed., 1976.

*Principle of Cohesion* claimed that ideas that are closely connected tend to be placed together.<sup>3</sup>

The above statements are a refinement of the traditional idea of *ordre direct* or *naturel*, advocated as early as in the ancient belief in an undisturbed harmony between language and thought. The speculations about whether thought preexists language and conditions its form returned again in the 17th century empiricist-rationalist debate, to climax in Condillac's *Liaison des idées* — a conviction that sensations and linguistic signs move on parallel tracks and condition each other.

Another attempt at reconciling thought and grammar was made by Weil (Weil, 1887), who postulated a parallel run of two movements: an objective movement, expressed by syntactic relations, and a subjective movement, projected in the order of words. His comparison of the order of words in ancient languages to that in the modern languages led him to the following conclusions: "In the modern languages we follow the order of ideas as in the ancient; this is the law of every reasonable being. The order of ideas is shown by the order of words. But this order of words serves at the same time more or less to express the syntactic relations. Our languages tend more and more to replace this double march of the sentence by a single one. The subject was originally but the point of departure of a sensible act which serves as a model for the construction of the sentence. Our languages tend to make of the subject the point of departure for the thought itself. This is the reason why our languages oblige us to choose a confirmation of the sentence in which the syntactical march shall not deviate too greatly from that of the thought. What they demand then, is not the sacrifice of the order of one's ideas to the syntax; on the contrary, they would have the syntax conform to the required order of words". (Weil, 1887: 36)

2.2. Inconclusive as they must be — for an obscure understanding of the processes going on in the mind and the mechanism underlying language production — such speculations have brought into prominence the important semantic aspect of the word order phenomenon and, finally, also its pragmatic dimension, the latter largely owing to Weil, who in his research came close to contextualist positions and inspired the later work on FSP done within the Prague school of linguistics.

Though in the end largely extending the scope and understanding of word order pragmatics, such studies initially only echoed a much earlier interest in respective matters. Problems pertaining to considerations by Prague linguists found expression in Behaghel's second law purporting that sentence elements which take up preceding material stand before those that do not, i.e.,

<sup>3</sup> Examples overriding this principle were treated as a result of either topicalization processes or Heavy Noun Phrase Shift (Gesetz der wachsenden Glieder).

that old concepts precede the new ones. Likewise, Jespersen's *Principle of Actuality* says that what is at the moment uppermost in the speaker's mind tends to be expressed first. This stress on psychological and subjective factors in language organization evidently takes after the traditional criterion of IMPORTANCE which drove the ancients to identify the first and the last positions in the sentence as strategic places in its communicative lay-out. Much later the postulation of topic-comment bipartition went along similar lines.

2.3. In this way the theoretical approach to word order studies directed attention to some universal principles of the thought-language matching, as well as made it quite clear that word order is only a surface exponent of a number of semantic and pragmatic factors in the service of communication. Regretfully, however, the separateness of semantic and pragmatic considerations has never been adequately stated nor explicated. Neither has a compact uniform theory been proposed to bring the multiplicity of often conflicting, or simply contradictory, terms, statements and proposals to a common denominator. This is why, though much inspiring and revealing, the up-to-date findings are neither conclusive nor faultless; it may be said that semantics and pragmatics of linearization in language are still in statu nascendi. What seems of primary interest to such studies is the mechanism with which a given language makes its grammatical system comply with communicative needs. Similarly, the notion of strategic places in the sentence demands further explication as its understanding — alike the understanding of genuine communicative principles responsible for word order changes and differences — is still much of an unexplored area in linguistics. It seems a rule of thumb that the stricter a language is about its word order rules, the more difficult it is to identify its strategic places and, ultimately, the communicative lay-out of its sentences. (The author excludes speech from her considerations). These languages, e.g., English, appear to need a larger perspective in order fully to reveal their response to communicative objectives, and hence the usual sentence-frame proves too narrow.

3. In her perception of the phenomena in question the author disregards the surface ordering of such grammatical categories as S, V, O, to the advantage of a semantico-pragmatic interpretation. In this way the ordering of the basic sentence constituents is viewed as a sequence of semantic roles in their communicative perspective. In consequence the term *word order* does not really reflect the ultimate objective of such an analysis; what we really arrive at in an examination of thus conceived sequences within a sentence is not the order of words but basically the arrangement of semantic roles determined by the cooperating, or else conflicting, rules of grammar and communication.

Languages tend to a different extent — grammar permitting — to retain the correspondence between the communicative rank of a sentence element and

its linear position; the concepts of strategic places and topic-comment bipartition, though not sufficiently explicated, supply here a solid foundation for further studies. It may be proved that similar tendencies are found to operate in languages with greatly varying susceptibility to word reorderings, e.g., Polish and English. Illustrative here is the thematic beneficiary which retains its initial position in such sentences as below:

- 1a. *Dziewczynce dali książkę*
- b. *The girl was given a book.*

The communicative status (theme), the semantic role (beneficiary), and the position in the linear organization of the sentence (initial) are reconciled at the expense of grammatical changes. Similar "concessions" on the part of grammar can also be observed in sentences such as following:

- 2a. *W pokoju zapanowała cisza*
- b. *The room turned silent,*
- 3a. *Na rynku kłębiło się od ludzi*
- b. *The market swarmed with people,*
- 4a. *U nas w pracy był wypadek*
- b. *We had an accident at work,*
- 5a. *Nożem nie przekroisz tego*
- b. *A knife will not cut it,*
- 6a. *Jej nie należała się ta nagroda*
- b. *She did not deserve that prize,*

regardless of other solutions also possible. Cf., e.g.;

- 3c. *It turned silent in the room,*
- 5c. *You won't cut it with a knife,*

which, however, need a separate treatment going beyond the preliminary investigations of the present paper.

In conclusion it is claimed that the grammatical and communicative roles of individual sentence constituents call for a much more subtle insight than it has been done so far. It seems of interest to investigate how far languages with heavy word order constraints tolerate reorderings dictated by communicative preferences and, once their tolerance ends, what mechanisms are set in motion to make the sentence comply with communicative goals. What deserves particular attention is the search for regularities with which grammar in such languages responds to a functional perspective of given sentence types. Incidentally, it is claimed that such regularities exist. For the purpose of such an analysis a basic set of semantic roles must be reconsidered, communicatively evaluated in terms of topic-comment bipartition and, finally, compared with their preferable realizations in the grammatical structure of a given language.

Similar analyses may stipulate the need for a broader, beyond-the-clause perspective in order better to understand linguistic and semi-linguistic processes. The author hopes to return to her tentative statements and discuss them in greater detail in her later studies.

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