

Languages with SOV word order and no morphological marking of core arguments

Languages with no free or bound morphological marking of core arguments (here isolating languages) typically employ linear order for distinguishing who is doing what to whom. The linear order in such languages is typically SVO. A sample of roughly 300 languages, based on the WALS database (Haspelmath et al. 2005) and my own studies, contained 21 isolating languages. Of these 21 languages, 17 (81 %) had SVO word order and 4 (19%) had SOV order (multiple languages from the same genera were not counted). Thus, the proportion of isolating languages with SOV word order may be around as low as 1 % in the world's languages despite an overall preference for SOV (Dryer 1992). Notably, it also seems that isolating languages disallow V- and O-initial orders.

In this presentation, I offer a functionally motivated explanation for the rarity of SOV word order in isolating languages. Evidence from language processing and functional principles suggest that SVO word order in isolating languages is functionally better motivated than SOV. Firstly, Gibson's (1998) parsing theory suggests that syntactic attachment occurs at the verbal head. Thus, in languages with SOV word order the parser would have to hold both S and O until it reaches the verb, instead of only S in languages with SVO word order, making the former type more difficult to process (see also Ueno and Polinsky 2005). Secondly, SVO is the most economic word order in isolating languages, because the core arguments are distinguished by the place of the verb alone and independent of the presence of the other argument. In SOV word order, on the contrary, correct identification of the role of S requires the presence of O as well. Thus, S could be misinterpreted as O if for some reason O is deleted. Thirdly, SVO word order represents more iconically the order initiator-act-target in the physical world.

Since isolating language with SVO word order seems to be functionally better-motivated type than isolating languages with non-SVO order, we could expect that the latter is unstable diachronically. Evidence from language change seems to support this. Firstly, if a language with non-SVO word order lost its morphological marking of core arguments, we could expect it to change to SVO word order. This process is widely attested, especially in Creole languages. Secondly, if an isolating language with SVO word order changed its word order, we could expect it to develop case marking or agreement to escape the instability of the isolating non-SVO type. In fact, this change – which is a rarity in itself – is attested in Kamti Tai, a tonal and isolating language spoken in Myanmar. It has changed from SVO to SOV word order probably due to language contact, but as a consequence, has reanalyzed its definite marking particles as object marking particles (Khanittanan 1986). Thus, it seems that isolating non-SVO language type is diachronically unstable, and that poor functional motivation offers at least a partial explanation to the rarity of this type.

References:

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