Word order and discourse prominence
in western Austronesian symmetrical voice languages

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The order of words in a clause, and in particular the order of subject (S), object (O) and verb (V), is one of the most basic typological features by which linguists classify languages. In the languages of the world, all six possible orders of S, O, and V are attested, though OVS and OSV seem to be extremely rare (Dryer 2013). While some languages exhibit rigid word order, other languages are more flexible, allowing for more than one word-order pattern. This also is the case in many western Austronesian languages, which allow for both SVO and VOS orders, as illustrated in (1) with an example from Karo Batak (Borneo, Indonesia), where the subject precedes the verb in a. but follows the verb-object complex in b.

(1) KARO BATAK (actor voice)

a. [*Si   Limbeng*]SUB/A *lalap   maba*   [*ranan*]OBJ/U
   si   Limbeng   lalap   N-baba   rana-en
   PN   Limbeng   always   AV-carry   conversation-NR.UG
   'Limbang kept the conversation going.' (Woollams 2005: 544)

b. *Nukur*   [*kai*]OBJ/U   [*kam*]SUB/A *ku   tiga*?
   N-tukur   kai   kam   ku   tiga
   AV-buy   what   2SG   to   market
   'What did you buy at the market?' (Woollams 2005: 544)

Furthermore, many western Austronesian languages are so-called symmetrical voice languages (cf. Foley 1998, 2008; Himmelmann 2005). That is, in addition to the actor-voice construction, in which the agent argument is the subject (as illustrated in (1)), they exhibit a second basic transitive construction, the undergoer voice, in which the undergoer is the subject (cf. (2)).

(2) KARO BATAK (undergoer voice)

a. [*Matawari*]SUB/U   *i-tutup-i*   [*embun   me-kapal*]OBJ/A
   sun   UV-cover-APPL   cloud   ADJ-thick
   'The sun was obscured by thick cloud.' (Woollams 2005: 545)

b. *I-tima-i*   [*raja Acéh*]OBJ/A *denga*   [*Putri Hijau*]SUB/U
   UV-wait-APPL   king Aceh   still   Putri Hijau
   'The king of Aceh still waited for Putri Hijau?' (Woollams 2005: 545)

Word order alternations in these symmetrical systems are thus particularly interesting, because the symmetry in the linking leads to four distinct semanto-syntactic options: SUB/A V OBJ/U; V OBJ/U SUB/A; SUB/U V OBJ/A; V OBJ/A SUB/U.

While it has been claimed that in western Austronesian languages there is a structural bias for agents to precede undergoers (Riesberg et al. 2019), little is known as to what determines word order in actual natural discourse.

In this talk, I present first results from a corpus study of (02:55 hours of) spoken Totoli (Sulawesi, Indonesia), a language that shows the same voice and word order alternations as Karo Batak. Investigating the effect of different discourse-related factors such as lexical form, animacy, person, and topicality of both arguments on word order, we see that, generally, a rising prominence contour (i.e. a constellation in which the subject is less prominent than the object) facilitates post-verbal subject.

However, it can also be observed that AV and UV behave differently and different word orders in the two voices seems to serve different functions: In AV, subjects with higher discourse prominence prefer the post-verbal position, leaving the pre-verbal position as a prominence lending position for less prominent arguments.

References

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