Language contact, language change and flexible word order in Warlpiri

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Warlpiri is a Pama-Nyungan language spoken in the Northern Territory. Its flexible word order, generous use of zero anaphora, and discontinuous nominal expressions have led to much attention in the field of linguistics (e.g. Hale 1983, Legate 2001), and its documentation began relatively early with Tindale (1931), Pink (1934), Capell (1952), and Hale (1967). Hence, Warlpiri lends itself relatively well to studies on language change, since it has been documented more extensively than other Australian languages, and since there is more data for analysis available (Nash 1980, Simpson 2006).

Warlpiri currently has about 2,276 speakers (2016 ABS Census) who are in increasing contact with Standard Australian English, mostly through the education system (O'Shannessy 2006). Warlpiri speakers are also in contact with Australian Aboriginal English (Malcolm 2001, Eades 2004), Kriol (an English-lexified creole spoken in the Northern Territory, Schultze-Berndt et al. 2013) and other neighboring languages (O'Shannessy 2006). A number of studies have pointed towards changes in Warlpiri due to language contact, for example the loss of ergative marking (Bavin and Shopen 1985, O'Shannessy 2006) and the emergence of the mixed language Light Warlpiri (O'Shannessy 2006).

An open question is if the flexible word order has changed, especially considering the SVO order of its contact languages (Standard Australian English, Light Warlpiri, and to a lesser extent Australian Aboriginal English and Kriol) (O'Shannessy 2006, 2010). The present project aims to answer this question by creating the to-date largest corpus of glossed, annotated, and tagged Warlpiri narratives. In order to find potential language change, stories from two different time periods are collected. In the earlier time period (1960s), two recordings made by Kenneth Hale (Hale 1966-1967a, Hale 1966-1967b) are used. Both recordings are over an hour long and consist of autobiographical and procedural narratives, as well as descriptions of plants and animals. Coding is currently in progress, and consists of 640 clauses so far. In the later time period (2000s), 14 recordings from three different communities are used. The recordings consist of traditional stories, autiobographical narratives, and procedural narratives. The corpus currently consists of over 1500 clauses.

These recordings are segmented into intonation units, glossed, and translated, and then receive extensive morphosyntactic coding with the GRAID (Haig and Schnell 2014) annotation scheme from Multi-CAST (Haig and Schnell 2019). They also receive idea tracking annotations after Chafe (1994), reference tracking after ISNref (Schiborr et al. 2018), and a self-developed annotation scheme for tagging semantic and functional characteristics of elements within nominal expressions.

Preliminary results suggest that Warlpiri word order has become more similar to English word order, especially when an object is expressed by a nominal borrowed from English. The extent of flexible word order and its interplay with pragmatic effects are analysed for both time periods.

Apart from examining language contact and change in the flexible word order language Warlpiri, this presentation focuses on the advantages of working with natural language and corpora in the investigation of language change, particularly where structures sensitive to the discourse context are explored.

Keywords: Language change, language contact, Warlpiri, word order, information structure

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