

Topics in English Syntax: Language Typology Using WALS,

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1 Introduction

- We want to accommodate all human languages.
- We should look at the way languages vary. Are there patterns?
- There are two dangers when dealing with languages other than English
 - thinking that they are quite like English when in fact they are rather different
 - thinking that they are quite different from English when in fact they are quite similar
- An excellent online source of information about the languages of the world is the World Atlas of Linguistic Structure (WALS) (<http://wals.info/>).

1.1 Two basic approaches to variation across languages

- How different two languages appear depends in part on the theoretical framework assumed.
- e.g. if one assumes traditional PS rules, then OV and VO languages will have quite different VP rules, but if one assumes ID/LP format, they will have the same rule:
 - (1) $VP \rightarrow V, NP$
- Similarly a language that has pre-positions and post-positions:
 - (2) $P \rightarrow P, NP$
- But there have been traditionally two rather different approaches to variation.
 - underspecification
 - transformation
- an underspecification approach tries to abstract away from differences, identifying a common part, and a separate idiosyncratic part of the description (ID/LP format is an example of this)
- a transformation approach assumes that there is one basic pattern, and variations are derived from it (e.g. by movement rules), e.g. all languages might be assumed to be V-O, with O-V order derived by head-movement.

2 Clause structure

- Languages differ in the relative order of Subject Object and Verb:
 - VSO
 - SOV (Japanese)
 - SVO (English)
- If verb and object form a constituent, a language with the order SVO (subject-verb-object) and a language with the order SOV (subject-object-verb) might have the same clause structure, differing only in order.
- VSO languages are less common than SVO and SOV languages but quite common:

From WALS:

Word Order	No. of Languages
SVO	488
SOV	565
VSO	95

It has been generally assumed in transformational grammar that VSO orders result from a verb movement process applying to a structure in which verb and object form a constituent. On this view VSO languages have the same underlying clause structure as SVO and SOV languages.

3 Head Initial and Head Final Languages

- In many languages verbs precede their objects (VO), in others it is the other way round (OV)
- In many languages prepositions precede their objects (PO), in others it is the other way round (OP) – [in this case we often talk about post-positions]
- English has VO and PO
- Japanese has OV and OP
- Is this correlation common?
- Some statistics from WALS (see WALS 95A)
- <http://wals.info/combinations/95A#2/15.0/153.0>

	Preposition + object	Object + preposition
Verb + object	454	41
Object + verb	14	472

- It is common for a language to order most heads and dependents (both complements and adjuncts of various kinds) in the same way.
- Languages in which heads generally precede dependents are referred to as head-initial languages.
 - e.g. Arabic, Welsh
- Languages in which heads generally follow dependents are referred to as head-final languages.
 - e.g. Japanese

4 Some Other Aspects of Word Order

4.1 Order of Nominal and Relative Clause

- (3) a man [that I saw] (English: N-Relative)
- (4) [watashi ga mitta] hito (Japanese: Relative-Noun)
- (5) Which is more common, cross linguistically? (Exercise)
- (6) How does this relate to the relative order of Object and Verb?
- (7) See WALS 96:

	Nominal + relative	Relative + nominal
Verb-object	415	5
Object-verb	113	132

4.2 Order of Adjective and Noun

- (8) an interesting idea (English: Adj-N, typically)
- (9) Adj-N (Exercise)
- (10) See WALS 87

4.3 Correlation with Order of Verb and Object?

- See WALS 97

	Noun + adjective	Adjective + noun
Verb-object	456	114
Object-verb	332	216

5 Ergativity

- Many languages mark subjects and transitive and intransitive verbs in the same way and mark objects differently.
- Most European languages, including English, are like this.
(11) a. He died.
b. He killed him.
- But some languages mark subjects of intransitive verbs and objects in the same way and mark subjects of transitive verbs differently.
- These are known as ergative languages, and the case of intransitive subjects and objects is called absolutive and the case of transitive subjects is called ergative.
- An example is Hunzib (van den Berg 1995: 122)

- (12) a. kid y-ut'-ur
girl CL2-sleep-PST
'The girl slept.'
b. oždi-l kid hehe-r
boy-ERG girl hit-PST
'The boy hit the girl.'

In Hunzib the ergative has an overt marker *-l*, while the absolutive is unmarked.

- See WALS 98 and 99;
- Are there any ergative-absolutive languages in Europe or Africa?
- Where is this strategy popular?

6 Wh-phrases

- Some languages, e.g. English, require wh-phrases (interrogative phrases) to be in initial position.
(13) What did John eat?
- Others, e.g. Japanese, have them in the same clause-internal position as ordinary phrases.
(14) John-ga nani-o tabeta-no?
John-NOM what-ACC ate-Q
'What did John eat?'
- The latter are said to be wh-in-situ languages.

6.1 Some statistics from WALS

Position	No. of Languages
Wh-phrases in initial position	264
Wh-phrases not in initial position	615

6.2 How does the position of wh-phrases relate to the order of verb and object?

- Some statistics from WALS:

	Verb-object	Object-verb
Wh-phrases in initial position	156	76
Wh-phrases not in initial position	253	317

7 Morphology

Languages differ in how much morphology they have, especially in how much case they have and how much agreement.

7.1 Some statistics from WALS

No. of Cases	No. of Languages
No morphological case-marking	100
2 cases	23
3 cases	9
4 cases	9
5 cases	12
6-7 cases	37
8-9 cases	23
10 or more	24

8 Some Exercises

Try to find the answers to the following questions in WALS (or find others that you think are more interesting – these are just to get you going).

- What is chapter 124 about?
 - is WALS right, as far as you can tell (from the languages you know about)? [This mainly just means, find the languages you know about, on the Map, and see what WALS says about them on this topic].
 - How would you cite this chapter if you wrote something on the topic?
 - Do you see any patterns of geographical distribution?
- Japanese marks polar (yes/no) questions with a final particle. Is this common?
- Which Chapter(s) will help you look into Word Order Variations?
- Where in the world is Ergativity popular?
 - What *is* ergativity?
 - Are there any ergative language in Asia and Europe?
 - What about Basque?
- What can WALS tell you about Japanese?
- What can WALS tell you about English?
- Japanese and Chinese (and many other Asian languages) have numeral classifiers – what other languages have them? Is it a common feature?
- What does this page: <http://wals.info/languoid/genealogy> tell you about?
- Where are Indo-European Languages spoken?
- Where are Mayan Languages spoken? What are some examples?
- Does Ainu have an inflectional future tense?
- What languages do have inflectional futures? How many languages in the sample have an inflectional future, how many do not?
- Is it more common for Subjects to precede Verbs, or the other way round? (see 81A and 82A)
- Investigate the relationship between order of Adjective and Noun, and Degree Word and Adjective
- Investigate the relationship between order of Adjective and Noun, and Numeral and Noun
- ... and Relative Clause and noun
- What do you expect the limitations of WALS to be?
- Do you think it might be useful to you?