Basic word/constituent order:

Source: Source: Croft, Comrie and Tallerman

The research work on word-order typology is very significant. It has helped the researchers to be acquainted with not only the functional aspect of the structural dependencies of languages but also with the formal aspects of the grammar.

Irrespective of theoretical orientation, linguists are involved in creating and applying abstract categories whenever they engage in analyzing language.

The typological study of word-order phenomenon must have served as the background information for the researchers to predict the universals in human languages.

One could even go to this extend in saying that it is the word-order typology that has proven to be a powerful line of thinking in answering the question ‘What is language?’

However, there are some basic issues in word/constituent order typology that are very contentious.

There is no doubt that the orderings of verb with the object in either OV or VO form have helped us to understand the nature and function of various **structural nuances** of human languages.

However, one of the fundamental questions that remains unexplored is how should one know or determine about the **basic order of constituents** in a given language.

This question is somewhat explainable if we talk about the languages which have **rigid order of constituents** like English.

But what about the languages that have flexible ordering the constituents!

Constituent order variation:

The researchers in typology have claimed that most of the languages of the world would have more than one way of arranging the constituents i.e. Subj, Obj and Verb.

Even if a language is fairly rigid in ordering these constituents, it would employ some discourse strategies for the variations in the order of the constituents in the language.

For example, when we say ‘Bean, I don’t like’ with an order of OSV in English, it is very much clear that this order i.e. OSV is used for a very specific context.

This is because we know that it is not the basic order of the constituents in English language.

However, in many other languages, two or more word orders may occur frequently and they might not have any unique discourse function.

Had this not been the case, Greenberg would not have come up with a universal and implicating the order of other units/elements in languages.

If this is case, how we should decide as to what the basic word order is.

Some linguists have proposed that in classifying languages according to basic constituent order, **a category** should also be made for languages that doesn't demand the so called' basic word order' at all (Thompson 1978).

The idea is good, however, up until this is formalized; we have to worry about the basic word/constituent order.

The basic classification of languages by the typologists into two distinct types i.e. languages with fixed order and languages with flexible order is grounded in whether constituent order is primarily ***sensitive to pragmatic considerations*** *(flexible) or* ***syntactic consideration****(fixed)*.

This proposal sounds powerful in a sense that typologists won't have to *impose a rigid constituent order classification on a language* that does not manifest any obvious rules for the linear arrangement of clausal units.

Nevertheless, there are other problems with this proposal.

- The first problem that we encounter in most of the situation is that *languages reveal a* ***degree of flexibility*** in the ordering of constituents.
- Given the degree of flexibility, at one extreme-end we have languages like English that would be quite rigid and require some discourse factors for any change in the fixed pattern of SVO.
- The SVO pattern is almost imposed strictly on the units of the clauses with a small set of principled exceptions. For example:
- 1. ?a. Sweet, I hate.
- ??b. Believe in you me, hum.. no way.
- √c. The maid sliced the bread.

- At another extreme, we have languages like Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Hindi and others which show a great deal of flexibility in terms of the arrangement/ ordering of the constituents in the sentences. For example:

3	vr̩ksʰɑt	pətrɑɲɪ	pətəntɪ	OSV
	tree-3S-Abl	leave-3Pl-Nom	fall-3Pl-Imp-Pres	
	‘The leaves are falling from the tree’.			

a	pətrɑɲɪ	vrksʰɑt	pətəntɪ	SOV
b	pətəntɪ	pətrɑɲɪ	vrksʰɑt	VSO
c	vrksʰɑt	pətəntɪ	pətrɑɲɪ	OVS
d	pətəntɪ	vrksʰɑt	pətrɑɲɪ	VOS
e	pətrɑɲɪ	pətəntɪ	vrksʰɑt	SVO

Greek

a. ho didaskal-os paideuei to paidi-on [SVO]
ART teacher-NOM teaches ART boy-ACC
The teacher instructs the boy.

b. ho didaskalos to paidion paideuei [SOV]

c. paideuei ho didaskalos to paidion [VSO]

d. paideuei to paidion ho didaskalos [VOS]

e. to paidion ho didaskalos paideuei [OSV]

f. to paidion paideuei ho didaskalos [OVS]

In between these two types of languages where the order of constituents is either fixed or almost free, there exists another **type** where the order of the constituents is *relatively* free (i.e. with some basic constraints that must be obeyed).

The word '***relatively***' is very important, yet tricky here. ***Warlpiri*** (Pama-Nyungan: Australia) is one such language where, the only restriction in terms of ordering of the constituents is that the auxiliary must occupy the second position in the sentence. For example:

3. a.	ngarrks-ngku	ka	wawirri	panti-rni
	man-erg	aux	kangaroo	spear-nonPast
	'The man is spearing the kangaroo'.			
b.	wawirri	ka	panti-rni	ngarrks-ngku
c.	wawirri	ka	ngarrks-ngku	panti-rni
d.	panti-rni	ka	wawirri	ngarrks-ngku
e.	panti-rni	ka	ngarrks-ngku	wawirri
f.	ngarrks-ngku	ka	panti-rni	wawirri

In addition to this relative freedom in the ordering of the constituents in a sentence, Warlpiri also manifests some other structural properties that are said to be very typical for the languages which are flexible in ordering the constituents.

One of the salient structural properties in Warlpiri is that it allows for a discontinuous constituent-ship for some nominal elements. For example:

4. a.	yalumpa	wawirri	ka-pi-rna	panti-rna
	that	kangaroo	aux-1S-nonPst	spear-nonPst
	'I will spear the kangaroo'.			
b.	wawirri	ka-pi-rna	panti-rna	yalumpa
	kangaroo			that

This Phenomenon could remind us something called 'pied-piping' in English, where in case of some 'phrasal verbs, the preposition of the 'VP' is stranded and is put after the DO of the verb (or at the end of the sentence).

For example: 'They **send** the relatives **off**.'

The third property of Warlpiri, which should also be the characteristics of flexible constituent order languages, is that it allows extensive use of ‘pro-drop’.

The use of the term ‘pro-’ for ‘pronoun’ is case-sensitive in Generative paradigm, and therefore, there are two kinds of ‘pro-s’ 1. ‘PRO-’ and 2. ‘pro-’.

Practitioners of generative school make a very complex presentation of the topic.

However, for typology class, it should be enough (and I guess is the only crux of matter) that *‘PRO’ is a null subject of an infinitival/non-finite clause*, and the *‘pro-’ should be classified as the null subject of a finite clause*.

Now, let us see what it should mean to say that flexible constituent order languages allow extensive use of ‘pro-drop’:

Pro-drop in languages

Warlpiri:

5. a. pɑnti-rni ka
spear-3S aux-nonPst
'S/he is spearing him/her/it'.

Hindi:

b. jəldi kər-o, vərənɑ gɑɽi nəhi pəkəɽ pɑyẽ-ge
fast do-2S-imp otherwise train neg catch-V1 find-1Pl-fut
'You hurry up, otherwise we won't catch the train'.

Based on the above discussion, we would conclude the section that Warlpiri should be classified as one of those languages which allows for a flexible constituent order.

Now, we would like to point out that it is not very difficult to predict as to why the constituent-order in English is called a fixed order of the constituents.

We can also explain easily as to why Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, and Hindi present another extreme case where degree of flexibility is very high in terms of ordering the constituents, and it is also not difficult to understand as to why they are called 'free word-order languages'.

However, if we want to place Warlpiri in the continuum of this free VS rigid ordering of the constituents;

we would like to say that it poses challenges in determining a clear-cut classification for the languages that fall somewhere between the two extremes.

Let us examine the constituent order of one more Language before we conclude the section:

O'odham (Uto-Aztcan: USA/Maxico)

6. a.	ceoj	'o	ko:ji	ceposid	(SOV)
	boy-3S	aux	pig	brand-nonPst	
	'The boy brands the pig'.				
b.	ko:ji	'o	ceoj	ceposid	(OSV)
c.	ceoj	'o	ceposid	ko:ji	(SVO)
d.	ko:ji	'o	ceposid	ceoj	(OVS)
e.	ceposid	'o	ceoj	ko:ji	(VSO)
f.	ceposid	'o	ko:ji	ceoj	(VOS)

- The main observation about O'odham and Warlpiri is that even when they allow for a flexible ordering of the constituents, they have certain structural properties which indicate that they are also highly structured in their own ways.
- O'odham allows for any arrangement of S,O and V, but certain orders are much more frequent than others.
- The arrangement of constituents is guided by some pragmatic considerations (Payne 1987, 1992).
- Similar to Warlpiri, the 'aux' i.e. the auxiliary veb must occupy the second position in the ordering of the constituents in a sentence.
- Hale (1992) discovers that O'odham maintains an SOV order at an abstract level of grammar.
- So, we will have to say the following facts about the constituent order in O'odham:

- 7. Abstract level: SOV
- Surface level : Flexible order
- If this is the state of affair for the ordering of the constituents, at which level of grammar and typological classification should we discuss the notion of ‘Basic constituent order’?
- Payne (1987) rightly observes that at this stage of typological research, there is hardly any space for any ‘dogmatism’ in answering such difficult questions.
- However, several proposals and observations have been made to offer some tentative solution for the problems.
- One of the proposals that came from Dryer (1992) is known as ‘Branching Direction Theory’.

- It is an important suggestion because it is based on the **configurational relationship** between the constituents.
- We would claim at some point of our discussion that there are languages in which there seems to have a **non-configurational** relationship between their constituents.
- However, it is worth examining Dryer's BD-theory first before we discuss the later type.
- Mathew Dryer (1991; 92) has discussed some of the basic assumptions behind the head-dependent approach proposed by earlier typologists.
- He discusses and claims that the reasons for the lack of the predictability of the expected patterning by certain head-dependent pairs, such as Adj-N and Det-N (mainly about the Demonstrative pronouns) could be due to the factors that BD-theory can explain.

- Later, he also draws our attention to the fact that the predictive power of these pairs (with regard to head-dependent) relies on the fact that which ***element in a given pair is the HEAD***.
- He further says that 'head-dependent' relationship is not difficult to decide in the case of **verb-adverb**, but it may be a matter of debate for **ad-position and nouns** and **verb and auxiliaries** etc.
- Dryer, in order to examine these issues in detail, proposes his BD-Theory as follows:
- *The Branching Direction Theory (BDT): Verb pattern-ers are non-phrasal categories (i.e. non-branching) and object pattern-ers are phrasal categories (i.e. branching).*
- *That is, a pair of elements X and Y will employ the order XY significantly more often among VO languages than among OV languages if and only if X is a non-phrasal category and Y is a phrasal category.*

Dryer's BD-theory probes the structure of languages in more careful and detailed manner.

It is very much grounded in generative paradigm and thus it makes reference to the Phrase Structure Theory.

The basic distinction is made between branching and non-branching categories.

A branching category in PS-Theory is one which has internal structure.

For example, NP such as 'books about the war' is not an atomic unit and thus it should be broken down further in parts as it is shown in diagram 9.1.

Diagram 9.1

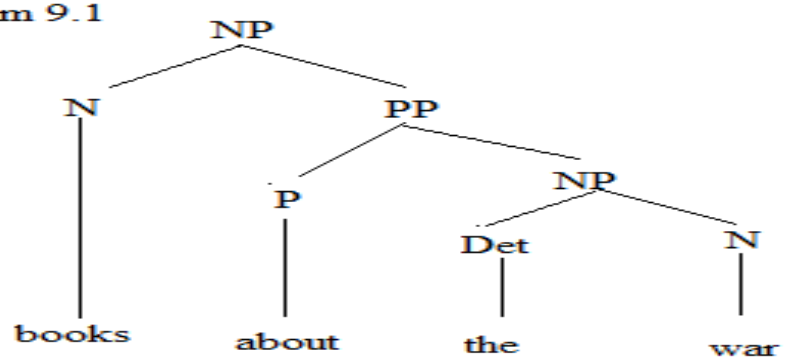


Diagram 9.2

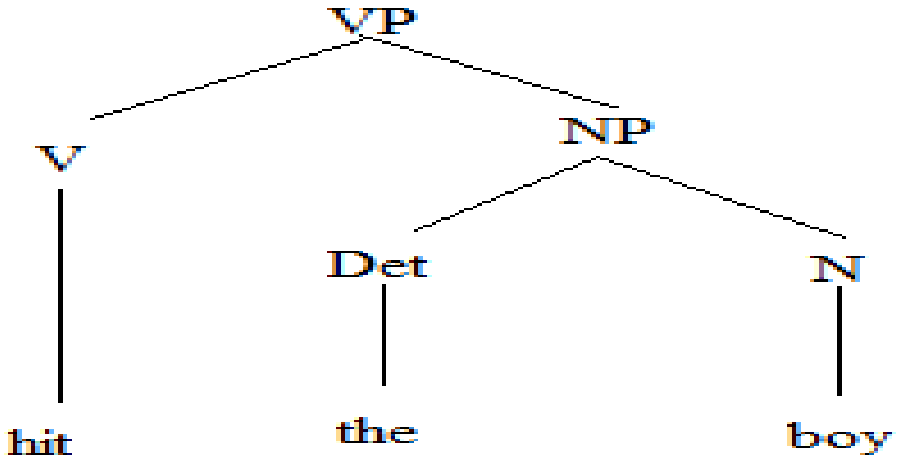
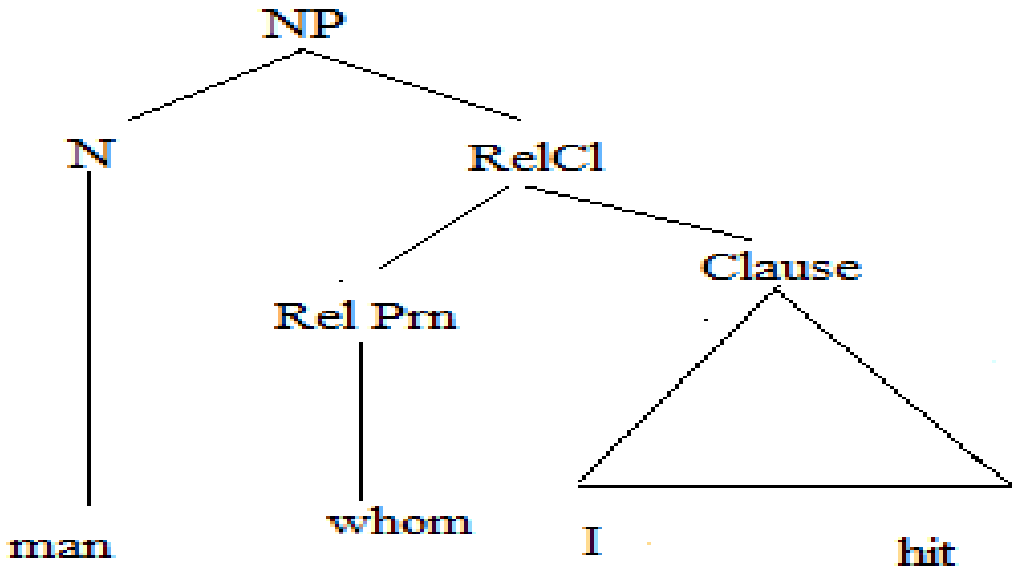


Diagram 9.3



As we see in the above diagrams 9.1-3, that some phrases are branching and some are non-branching and this is based on whether or not they have internal structure.

The noun ‘books’ is a non-branching category as it does not have any internal syntactic structure.

However, the PP in the same diagram shows up as a branching category.

A PP must to be further divided into a prepositional head and an NP, a complement to the head.

Dryer (ibid) sets up a requirement for his BD-theory here. ***A category is only considered branching for the purpose of the BD-theory if it consists of a non-branching head and a phrasal complement***.

For example, an adjective phrase, ‘very quite’ will not be a branching category because the degree word ‘**very’** is not a full phrase, i.e. ‘**very’** cannot be modified or expanded in any way.

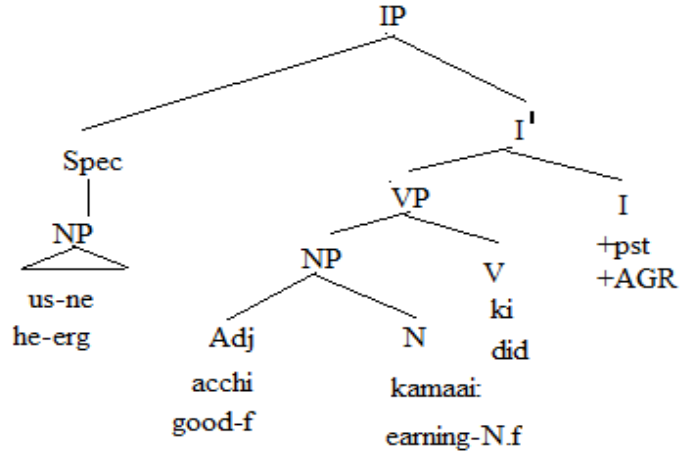
The merit of the BD-theory is that it is only after Dryer's proposal of BD-theory, researchers could predict that a language tends to be regular in placing branching categories **after** non-branching **before** non-branching unit.

Another way to express the same thing is that languages tend to be consistently **right branching** or consistently **left-branching**.

English is good example of right-branching and Hindi (mostly) is a good example of left-branching.

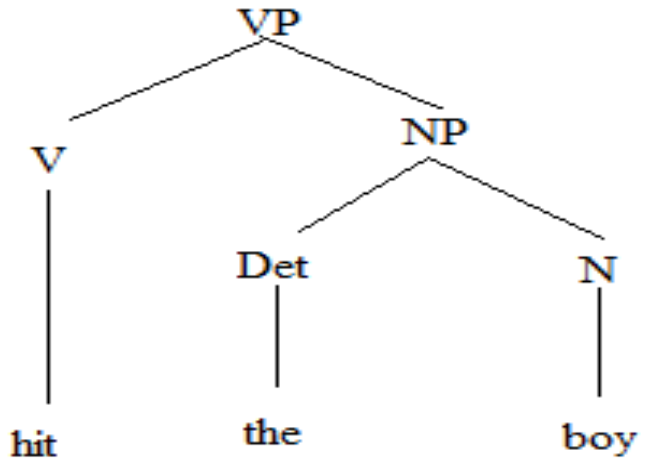
For example:

Diagram 10



'He did good earning'.

Diagram 9.2



- We could conclude the section by highlighting the merits of Dryer's proposal.
- The BD-theory seems to provide an explanation for Adj-Noun and Det-N pairs.
- He says when adjective phrases are used for the modification of a noun, they are not full branching categories in pre-nominal positions because they cannot take phrasal complements.
- For example:
- 11. a. the **happy** scholar
- b. the very **happy** scholar
- */??c. the scholar **happy** to help others
- That's all ☺