Determining the Basic Constituent Order

Source: Comrie, Jae Jung Song, Mallinson &Blake

- we have already pointed out in the presentation of the 'Basic word order' part-I that a language with flexible constituent order poses problem for determining the so called 'basic order of the constituent'.
- One of the best ways to arrive at or find out the 'BWO/BCO' is to take native speakers' intuition into account.
- It is the native speakers' intuition that helps us to find out which order may be '*correct, good, acceptable, somewhat acceptable, never heard before but sounds alright, and finally not possible and awkward*'.
- All of these are the degree of acceptability which can help us to find out the so called 'basic order of the constituent' in the sentences of different languages around the world.

The reliability of such intuitions, however, varies a lot. The judgment of native speakers seems to be influenced by several factors.

These factors include the education, sensitivity, attitude of the speakers for his/her native language.

Some of these factors become quite dominant in the contexts when we want to decide the basic order of the constituent in different languages without paying much attention or importance to any extra linguistic factors.

Thus, apart from the native speakers' judgment, there are other 'tests' that one can use to decipher the 'basicness of the order of constituent order' in languages.

These tests are known as '**Frequency**, **marked-ness principle**, and **pragmatically neutral contexts**'.

The effectiveness of these tests will depend on the language to which they are being applied.

Sometimes, a single test may be good enough to decide the BCO, however, in some other cases, we may have to apply more than one.

Let us examine each of these tests one by one:

Frequency:

One of the simplest ways to find out the ‘basic constituent order’ is by selecting a text, a text that has the required representative data from the language.

Having chosen the representative sample, we can simply count the number of occurrences of each constituent order type (Hawkins 1983).

We can decide about the basicness of order on the basis of the high frequency of occurrence of the order of X,Y or Z type of constituent.

This procedure may reveal that one of the types is clearly dominant than the other.

Suppose we have the aforementioned sample text in language X and it happens so that the SOV pattern occurs more than 70% of the time in the collected sample-text;

And no other type occurs more than 15% in the sample-text, it should be clear that in this language SOV is almost certainly the basic order of the constituent.

The test of frequency as a measurement for the basicness of the 'word order phenomenon' seems a very simple method, and may be very useful too, especially with a computer-aided tool like web-crawler and all.

However, the statistical difference between different types of constituent order is rarely this huge in languages for which determining the basic constituent order is difficult.

The shortcomings of such statistical method must have the following considerations:

Discourse function of parts of the text:

we must understand the fact that no matter how careful we are, we cannot select a text from any language that has equal discourse function for all its parts.

For example, the beginning of any text which intends to introduce any event or any special character etc. can be marked by some special constituent order.

Songs, drama, even novel and many other different kinds of narratives are full of such examples.

- These types and their strategies are often used in languages with flexible word order.
- For example if we study structure of Hindi film songs, the word order of the songs will prove to be VSO by the parameter of ‘frequency’.
- Sometimes, this is true even for languages with rigid order of the constituents.

For example, in English:

- **Over the hill came the troops, and in no time they conquered the whole area.**
- This is a very legitimate and correct expression in English and is part of very famous narrative text, and the text is full of such kind of sentences.
- So, when we adopt a method of text count, we must be aware of the discourse mechanisms that are used for some special effect in almost all languages of the world.
- The text mapping and frequency count may lead to some erroneous result about the basicness of the order of constituent in such cases.

In a similar way, we also should be aware of the fact that texts differ drastically in different ‘genres’.

Thus we should be careful in applying any universal yardstick for such statistical measurements.

Quakenbush (1992) reports one such language **Agutaynen** (spoken in Philippines) in which verb-initial clauses dominates narrative-text, however, SVO order is most common elsewhere in the language.

This is very common to attest in several languages. As we just said if one takes the example of ‘Bollywood songs’, in Hindi, we will find something like Agutaynen.

Meaning majority of Bollywood songs show VSO order and if we examine of word-order of Hindi elsewhere, we find SOV as the dominant order of the constituent.

Coming back to Agutaynen, we can say that it is a common fact that narrative texts involve a number of temporally sequenced events, and thus it is not surprising that languages may place such highly informative entities in the beginning of the clause.

- It has also been acknowledged by many researchers that certain elements of a text tend to occur pre-verbally, and these elements are;
- A. information that adds up new events to the discourse;
- B. information that is likely to contradict the expectation of the listeners;
- C. information that contrasts with previous elements in the text.
- In some languages, the text count is almost impossible because both subject and object hardly occur as full phrases in several cases.
- The subject or an object is used as a noun phrase (in full form) in these languages only when a new participant is introduced in the text.
- Once a participant has been introduced; it may not be mentioned overtly afterwards and it is replaced either by a morphological marker on the verb or by a clitic.
- For example:

2.Cayuga :

s^h-ɑko-ňohwe'-s

he-her-like-Hab

'He likes her'.

3. Eskimo:

Illu-	mi-	niip-	puq
house	his	be-in	3P-S-IND

'He is in his (own) house'. [Katamba:1993]

- In the above examples from Cayuga and Eskimo, the Subj and Obj noun phrases do not find their full occurrence in these languages.
- Thus, the 'text count' method would either leave these instances unaccounted or the researcher has to adopt some other alternative method to account for or determine the basic constituent order in these languages.

Principle of Markedness:

The basic constituent order of a language must be determined from the occurrences that are not marked for any special purpose or context.

The simplest way to understand the notion of 'markedness' is that it indicates about something which is not regular/default.

The marked constructions in a language might occur due to the strict rules of formal requirement of a particular context in that language.

Or it could be due to the violation of some formal rules in the language.

In either case, the basic constituent order of the language must be saved from both of these fallacies or indulgences.

For example:

4. Hindi

a.	mɛ̃-ne	rɑm-ko	kɪtɑb	nəhĩ	di
	I-1SM-Erg	Ram-3S-Dat	book-3FS	Neg	give-perf-3FS
	'I did not give the book to Ram'.				
b.	rɑm-ko	mɛ̃-ne	kɪtɑb	nəhĩ	di
c.	kɪtɑb	mɛ̃-ne	rɑm-ko	nahĩ	di

The above example in Hindi (4.a) would be called unmarked sentence and the variants of the same sentence in (b-c) will be called marked ones.

No matter how generous we are, we would agree to the fact that other variants would be required in the language only when there is some extra need or change of the semantics of the context;

For example, (b) could mean that 'I had to give the book to Ram, but I intentionally did not give the book to Ram',

And (c) would mean 'I was supposed to give the book to Ram, but I did not give it to Ram'.

This would make further sense if we compare this with the example in English as given below:

5. English
a. I like beans.
b. Bean, I like.

As Payne (1987) has explained that these two sentences differ with respect to their intonation contour.

The neutral intonation has been used in (5a) i.e. *a slow falling pitch that drops more sharply at the end of the utterance*.

This is something that would be called the default intonation pattern in English declarative sentences.

However, in (5b) there is a very short intense pitch that is followed by a brief pause.

This intense pitch is due to the heavy stress on the initial word 'Bean' in the sentence.

On the basis of the above account, (5b) would be considered the marked expression in English.

The reason for markedness is the extra phonological or morphological material (pause, a comma or any emphatic particle) that is added to in the sentence.

However, (4a and 5a) is unmarked as it represents the neutral intonation pattern.

The markedness principle applies to all levels of grammar, such as phonology, morphology and syntax.

Let us examine another morphological markedness that applies in Kutenai (Almosan-Keresiouan).

For example:

6. Kutenai (Almosan-Keresiouan)

a. wukɑt-i palkiy-s tiqɑt'
see-IND woman-OBV man
'The man saw the woman'.

b. wukɑt-ɑps-i tiqɑt'-s palkiy
see-INV-IND man-OBV woman
'The man saw the woman' or
'The woman saw the man'. (Dryer: 1994)

Note: OBV means 'obviate' used here to prevent it to be the agent.

As we can see, the above example (6) presents two constituent orders.

In (6a) we have VOS and other one is VSO in (6b).

The most important and marked morphology here is the morpheme '-ɑsp' which is used here to 'inverse' the role of Sub and Obj.

The attachment of '-ɑsp' to the verb not only subdues the power of '-OBV' but also allows the reverse interpretation.

Such additional formal marking makes (6b) a marked construction and thus cannot be considered as the basic constituent order in the language.

This is very good example of morphological markedness in Kutenai spoken by people of Montana in USA and some part of Canada.

If we leave out the syntactic markedness, it will be an injustice to the discipline.

The best example of a syntactic markedness is attested in German.

In German, we have SVO as the order of the constituent in simple clauses as well as the main clause of a complex sentence;

however, the order of the constituents in subordinate clauses is SOV. For example:

7. a. Der Mann sah den Jungen
the man-Nom saw the boy-Acc
'The man saw the boy'.

b. Ich weis, dass der Mann den Jungen sah
I know that the man-Nom the boy-Acc saw
'I know that the man saw the boy'.

Comrie: 1989

We could offer two reasons for considering SVO as the basic order of the constituents in German despite the fact that the language also displays an alternative order of the constituents i.e. SOV.

First, although a subordinator has been used to introduce the subordinate clause i.e. *dass*, but no special morphology appears on the main clause.

Thus, the main clause and any simple clause remain unmarked with SVO pattern.

Second, evidences from various cross-linguistic research entail that subordinate clauses tend to be more conservative in terms of retaining the older patterns.

So, we could guess that the German might have SOV in all clauses, but the basic order has changed to SVO.

The changed order of the constituents has been adapted in simple clauses and the main clauses;

however, the subordinate clauses rejected the change and remained SOV.

- Markedness has proven to be a great tool to decipher the basic constituent order in many languages.
- However, it might not serve a useful device for every language and in all the contexts.
- We should be aware that different constituent order and different patterns are not always followed by some distinct formal marking.
- Hence, in some cases the markedness test might not be useful at all.
- For example:

a. *Rospita suuta Anita.*
'Rospita washes Anita.'

b. *Sa$_i$-suuta Rospita$_i$-níí$_j$ Anita$_j$.*

c. **Anita Rospita suuta*(*-níí*).

d. **Anita$_j$ sa$_i$-suuta Rospita$_i$*(*-níí$_j$*).

8. Yagua (Peru)

a. Rospitɑ suutɑ Anitɑ
Rospita washes Anita

b. Sɑ=suutɑ Rospitɑ=nii Anita
he=washes Rospita=her Anita
'Rospita washes Anita'.
(ref: adopted from Everett 1989)

If we talk about the markedness, we would say that (8a) with SVO order should be called the 'basic constituent order'.

So, the order of the constituent with clitics in example (8b) which displays a different order of the constituent i.e. VSO is a syntactically marked structure.

The decision is made on the basis of the fact that the sentence (8a) does not have any special clitic marking thus these observation should be correct!

However, if we investigate the structure of ***Yagua*** further, we will get to know that it is VSO instead of SVO which is the basic order of the language (Payne 1985).

So, here is the punch line, we could rely on the procedure of 'markedness' in order to decide the basic order of the constituent;

However, this should not mean that we could apply this principle blindly.

Thus, we could and should use the 'markedness' principle to find out the 'basic constituent order' in languages;

However, we might have to parameterize the principle depending on the structural nuances of the language.

Pragmatically Neutral Context:

Choosing a ‘pragmatically neutral context’ is also listed as one of the methods to arrive at the basic constituent order in different languages.

The idea is simple. There are languages in which the speakers might prefer a different constituent order to highlight certain context bound information.

If we recall the Hindi sentences here, we would say that the variants are not ungrammatical but they are used for some special/specific contexts.

Thus, sentence (4a) can be called pragmatically neutral and the variants cannot be treated the examples of ‘pragmatically neutral instances’.

Such cases where speaker intends to mean something special and thus changes the order of the constituents cannot be accounted as good candidates to decipher the ‘basic constituent order’.

So, it is very important to neutralize the context by adopting a **simple narrative that is grounded temporally** and then take the sample for determining the ‘basic constituent order’.

- We also have to take precaution in order to determine the ‘Basic constituent order’ for languages in which the notion of S and O differs on the basis of so called ‘grammar’ and ‘logic’.

- Comrie (1989), referring to such facts, has pointed out that it is difficult in some languages to decide the notion of ‘subject’ and ‘object’ on the basis of their linear ordering in the sentence.
- For example:

9. a. muj^{h}-e b^{h}uk^{h} ləg-i hɛ
I-1S-Dat hunger-3F seem-F be-pres
‘I am hungry’.

b. dil-se k^{h}usi hui
heart-? (from/by/in) happiness be-perf-F
‘I/you (anyone) am happy overwhelmingly’.

c. ram-pər ghar-ki sari jimmevɑrɾyɑ̃ hɛ̃
Ram-3MS-Loc house-Gen all responsibilities-Npl-F be-pres-pl
‘Ram has all the responsibility of the house’.

- If we look at the examples (9a-c) in Hindi, we would say that they pose problems in terms of taking any concrete decision with regard to selecting the NP as the ‘subject’.
- The notion of subject in Hindi in (9a) has to be distinguished on two levels i.e. grammatical VS logical.
- The notion of ‘subject’ in (9b) is further complicated as it does not require the grammatical subject at all,
- And in (9c) if we consider ‘ram’ as the subject, we will have to parameterize the whole notion of subject.

- It is generally agreed upon by linguists across different schools of thought that it is only the nominative case marked NP that can be considered as the ‘subject’ of a declarative sentence in majority of the cases!
- One of the primary reasons to believe this is grounded in the fact that such NP would show the agreement with the verb in the sentence.
- Thus, languages that show ‘Obj-V-Agreement’ have to evolve ‘ergative-absolutive’ mechanism to accommodate the agreement facts.
- All of these will be explained in the course as the time advances, so don’t worry when you hear such terms which we don’t know now!

- Coming back to the problem of ‘subject-hood’ in the last example given in (9c)!
- There is a locative case suffix with the NP;
- This NP occupies the subject position but the verb does not agree with it.
- What should we do such cases!!!
- Nothing, but wait until the notion of ‘Non-nominative subject’ is explained in the course.
- That’s all ☺

Markedness