Basic Word Order and Information Structure in Ojibwe

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1. Introduction
   ● The goals of this presentation are to:
     ○ Give some background as to why we are interested in the question of basic word order
     ○ Look at a cross-linguistic study (Herring, 2012) aimed at predicting topic/focus order from basic word order
     ○ Evaluate its accuracy with respect to Ojibwe, since it is one of the languages included in the study (examples are taken from the Ottawa and Southwestern dialects)
     ○ Examine current research on factors, besides information structure, which may affect word order in Ojibwe (definiteness, animacy, obviation)
     ○ The conclusion is that the Herring (2012) study supports a basic word order of (at least) VS. A better understanding of the factors that affect word order, such as definiteness, animacy and obviation are needed to define word order variants.

2. ‘Basic’ Word Order
   ● By ‘basic,’ it is meant that there is a default or ‘starting’ configuration for arguments and the verb, from which other orders may be derived.
   ● That all languages have a basic word order is controversial (Mithun, 1992).
     ○ Languages that pose a problem for the notion of basic word order are polysynthetic with a full set of pronominal affixes on the verb. They do not use word order to encode argument relations. Word order is used to encode other factors, most notably pragmatic ones.
   ● In these languages, common methods for determining basic word order are problematic.
     ○ The most statistically frequent clauses are of no help in determining order because they include only one or even zero overt arguments (Mithun, 1992; Dryer, 1995)
     ○ Ambiguous sentences are very rare (Mithun, 1992).
     ○ Using relative ordering within pairs arose because of the rarity of clauses with overt subject and object nominals. This method fails when arguments are realized on the same side of the verb, such as VS and VO.
     ○ Since information structure is widely known to affect word order, current research into ‘basic’ word order often looks for clauses that are not affected by discourse factors (Sullivan, 2012).
     ○ Markedness is itself a relative notion (Dryer, 1995).
   ● Committing to a basic word order requires knowledge of why other orders occur, so that the unmarked/basic order can be defined as the default/elsewhere case (Mithun, 1992, Dryer, 1995).
   ● Committing to a basic word order would be beneficial if it were shown to correlate with other
structural characteristics of the language (Mithun, 1992).

3. Basic Word Order and Information Structure in Ojibwe

- Basic word order in Ojibwe is considered VOS (Tomlin & Rhodes, 1992; Valentine, 2001)
- Topic, also called theme (aboutness/old information), occurs postverbally, at the rightmost edge of the clause (Tomlin & Rhodes, 1992)
  - How can the unmarked order be VOS, but that same slot is also used for topic?
    - Its quantifier (if there is one) will float to the left of the verb:

  ▪ Ge dash mii kina gii-maajidwaawaad iw wziisbaakdomni.  
    all they-took-from-them their-sugar
    ‘And they took all their sugar from them.’
  ▪ Wedi ge gii g ga miijin maanda dash ge nii nga-miijin waawan.  
    That also you you-will eat-it this also I-l- will-eat-it egg.
    ‘As for the eggs, you eat that one, I’ll eat this one.’

- Thematically irrelevant (non-topic) NPs (Tomlin & Rhodes, 1992) will not float their quantifier to the left:

  ▪ Mii dash gii-wiindmaadwaad kina giw ninwag,...
    they-discussed-it all men
    ‘Then all the men discussed what...’

- Focus, also called rheme (new information), occurs preverbally (Valentine, 2001; Morse 2012; example from Sullivan, 2012):

  ▪ Mii eta go bagizowayaan-an baazikang.
    only EMPH swimsuit-PL IC-wear-3S
    ‘She is wearing only her swimsuit (bikini).’

- There is also evidence of a topic position preverbally.
  ▪ The entire constituent of shifted or newly introduced topics is preverbal (Sullivan, 2012):

  ▪ O-biigwa’aan iw biiwaabiko-makak wa’aw inini. Waagaakwad od-aabajitoon.
    3-break.it-0 DET metal-box DET man. axe 3S-use-0
    Minawaa ge aw ikwe gibishenidizo. Onzaam ombiigwewe-ni.
    and also DET woman cover.ones.ears Too.much loud.OBV
    This has been called a ‘discourse maintenance strategy’ (Sullivan, 2012), since topics returned to the foreground (in their last sentence serving as topic of a narrative) may also occur preverbally.

- Johnson and Rosen (2011) show preverbal shifted/new topic and focus positions in Menominee and Dahlstrom (2003) shows preverbal shifted/new topic and focus positions in Meskwakiki.

4. Basic Word Order as a Predictor of Information Structure Order

- Herring (2012) did a study that surveyed the basic word order of 36 languages, including Ojibwe, looking specifically at whether the subject is preverbal (SV) or postverbal (VS) in the basic word order.

- Herring concludes that the study finds basic word order to be the best predictor of the ordering of topic and focus, when compared to three other ‘naturalness’ principles previously cited or...
4.1 Coding in the Study

- The principles are as follows:
  - *Given information before new information*- The structure of utterances builds on what is known, adding new information which moves the communication forward.
  - *Newsworthiness*- The most pressing or newsworthy information, including that which is unexpected based on previous discourse, will precede less important information.
  - *Discourse Iconicity*- Information ideally is placed as close to the part of the discourse which it relates to as possible, so sentences start with what has been discussed and end with what will be discussed next.
  - *Word order type*- Information structure is determined relative to the language’s basic word order, as a rhetorical marking strategy. VS languages prefer focus-topic ordering, while SV languages prefer topic-focus ordering.
    - The total four principles clearly make distinctive and sometimes contradictory claims about pragmatic ordering.

- Herring then codes her chosen subtypes of topic and focus into given or new information as follows:
  - **Continuous topic**: *(Given)* A topic which carries over from the immediately preceding discourse.
  - **Shifted/New topic**: *(New)* A topic which is new or shifted, often signaled by a full noun phrase.
  - **Contrastive focus**: *(Given)* Focus that highlights a constituent which is already present either explicitly or implicitly in the discourse, typically to create a distinction between that and a parallel constituent in a previously uttered or implied clause.
  - **Presentational focus**: *(New)* Focus which introduces a referent into discourse for the first time.

- These focus subtypes are not the only options, (see Lambrecht (1994, 2000, 2001), as cited in Dahlstrom (2003) for other focus subtypes, for example). This study is limited to argument focus.

- Coding information structure in terms of ‘given’ and ‘new’ information are not the only options. Herring’s coding splits the subtypes of topic and focus.
  - Coding topics for ‘aboutness’ and foci for ‘moving discourse forward’ would group the subtypes together.
  - Even when the definitions of given and new information have been settled on, any focus subtype could be coded as ‘new’, since it will always add new information.

- The principles are then coded for the predictions they make about topic and focus in reference to the verb. For purposes of brevity, I will cover only the two principles relevant for Ojibwe, as the others clearly make incorrect predictions about topic being preverbal and focus being postverbal universally. These are the Newsworthiness Principle (Mithun, 1992) and the Word Order Principle (Herring, 2012). Below, I have combined the truncated chart with each principles’ predictions and accuracy. (*‘Weak’ predictions are put in brackets by Herring*):

Truncated and Combined Table from Herring (2012)
To call attention to the last line, it is incorrect that the Newsworthiness Principle would predict presentational focus as postverbal*. Also, to be fair, this principle was never designed for SV languages, but only for the type that pose a problem for basic word order, as previously stated. If this principle’s predictions were modified to suit SV languages, we can assume they would be reversed. Below is a modified table that includes these two corrections.

Modified Version of Table from Herring (2012)

- In the modified table, the Word Order Principle makes all the correct predictions for SV languages and the Newsworthiness Principle makes all the correct predictions for VS languages. The only mistake made by each principle in the other language type is with respect to shifted/new topics.

4.2 Results of this study
- The study shows SV languages to order topic before focus and VS languages to order focus before topic very generally, with the exception of shifted/new topics.
  - This could reflect the tendency for topics to be correlated with subjects.
- It identifies shifted/new topics as universally preverbal.
- The major takeaway from this study is a need for a more cohesive definition of the subtypes traditionally subsumed under the topic and focus labels, since current definitions do not predict...
the split in topic subtypes, such that shifted/new topics pattern with focus.

- Discontinuous NPs and the variability in analyzing them causes problems for a simple understanding of information structure in Ojibwe.

5. Other factors affecting word order

5.1 Definiteness

- Usually...
  - Indefinites are preverbal (Tomlin & Rhodes, 1992):
    
    \[\text{Mookman nglii-mkaan.}\]
    
    ‘I found a knife.’
  - Definites are postverbal (Tomlin & Rhodes, 1992)
    
    \[\text{Ngii-mkaan mookmaan.}\]
    
    ‘I found the knife.’

- Exceptions...
  - Indefinites may be postverbal if:
    - verb is a quantifier (\textit{baatiinak}, ‘be much, many’)
    - Tomlin and Rhodes (1992) say these verbs do not distinguish definiteness
    - NP is thematically irrelevant (doesn’t float quantifier to left of verb, see (3))
  - Definites may be preverbal if:
    - NP has a quantifier; the whole NP constituent is not fronted, only the quantifier.
    - Tomlin and Rhodes (1992) say this is a special case of NPs in contrastive focus, but it could instead be marking topic (see (1))
    - NP is contrastive
    - This is part of fronting focused information; the whole NP constituent will be fronted.
    - NP is a new/shifted topic of the local section of text

- Examination of the exceptions to the rules imply that information structure (ordering predictable/given information postverbally and unpredictable/new information preverbally in Ojibwe) provides the underlying motivation for these exceptions. In other words, information structure takes precedence over definiteness in word order. Mithun (1992) and Dahlstrom (personal correspondence) point out this correlation as well.

5.2 Animacy

- Rhodes (2010) reported grammaticality judgements of ditransitive sentences that showed a subtle, but undeniable effect based on the animacy of the theme when both the agent (\textit{kwe} 'woman') and recipient (\textit{binoojiins} 'baby') where definite and animate.
  - When the theme was also animate (\textit{mshiimmin} 'apple'), the order of VART was most preferred and VTAR was unacceptable. The preferred order is shown below:
    
    \[(6) \text{Wgii-shamaan aw kwe niw binoojiinsan mshiimman.}\]
    
    ‘The woman fed the baby an apple.’
  - When the theme was inanimate (\textit{miin} 'blueberries'), VTAR ordering was most preferred and VART was unacceptable. The preferred order is shown below:
    
    \[(7) \text{Wgii-shamaan miinan aw kwe niw binoojiinsan.}\]
The woman fed the baby blueberries.

For both themes, VATR was acceptable, though not the most preferred. Other orders in which the recipient preceded the agent were unacceptable. The preferred examples are shown below:

- A study by Morse (2012), which surveyed three major text collections, was able to reproduce these same findings.
  - As for why certain orderings were preferred or dispreferred, she suggests an analysis which draws upon the fact that animates outrank inanimates on the topical hierarchy, i.e., animates are much more likely to be topics than inanimates. Thus inanimate themes are dispreferred at the right edge (a topic position in Ojibwe), where animate themes are preferred. This again suggests the primacy of information structure in word order.

5.3 Obviation

- He found that when there were no pragmatic considerations, VOS was much more frequent.
- He also found that in clauses where obviation was a factor (both subject and object were 3rd person) and inverse morphology was used (subject was obviative and ranked lower on Topicality Hierarchy), the VSO order occurred. His examples are shown below:
  (8) O- zagam- igoo- n iniw animoons-an wa'aw inini.
  3- attach.by.mouth-INV-3' DET puppy-OBV DET man
  'The dog attached himself to this man.'
  (9) O- biminizha'-ogoo-n iniw gaazhagens-an aw waawaashkeshi.
  3- chase- INV-3' DET cat- OBV DET deer
  'The cat is chasing the deer.'
  - His explanation appeals to ranking on the topical hierarchy. Sullivan adds that obviate arguments occurring closer to the verb than proximate arguments is somewhat of a cross-familial tendency, but the only reference found for this assertion may be Junker (2000) for East Cree (Dahlstrom, personal correspondence).

6. Conclusion

- Herring’s (2012) study seems compelling in its support of basic word order. In this case, that Ojibwe is VOS.
- Overt nominals that are continuous topics will float their quantifier to the left of the verb. This entails that postverbal nominals that are topics, but lack a quantifier, will be unmarked.
- Overt nominals that are new/shifted topics or focus will move in their entirety to the left of the verb.
- Further research which seeks to standardize studies of information structure, especially in dealing with discontinuous NPs in Ojibwe, is needed.
- Information seems to have primacy over the factors of definiteness and animacy in final word order.
- Further research into the interactions of information structure with definiteness, animacy and obviation will help to better define how this ‘basic’ word order may vary.

References
Dahlstrom, A. (2003). Focus constructions in Meskwaki (Fox). In The Proceedings of the LFG'03
Conference (p. 144), Albany, New York.


Valentine, J. R. (date unspecified) *Anishinaabemowin Learner’s Grammar*.  

**Gloss guide**

I have retained the original glosses found in the cited sources, but some bolded emphasis of my own may have been added.

- 3-3rd person
- 3’-3rd person obviative
- OBV-obviative
- S-singular
- PL-plural
- OBJ-object
- DET-determiner
- AN-animate
- PST-past
- INV-inverse directional morphology
- DIR-direct directional morphology
- EMPH-emphasis particle