

DIACHRONIC INTERPRETATIONS OF WORD ORDER PARAMETER COHESION

John Whitman

National Institute for Japanese Languages and Linguistics and Cornell University

Yohei Ono

The Graduate University for Advanced Studies

A long tradition in the functional/typological literature attributes crosscategorical generalizations on word order to a language change (Givon 1975, Aristar 1991). The basic idea is simple: verb-object combinations become serial verb constructions and then PPs; other PPs develop from relational noun-NP combinations, complementizers from verb-TP complement combinations, etc. Whitman (2008) argues that “pure” cross-categorical constituent order generalizations are of this type. Generalizations affecting constituent order are of three types: (i) hierarchical generalizations, such as the requirement that external arguments be merged after internal arguments or the hierarchical generalizations posited in cartographic theories (e.g. Cinque 1999); (ii) derivational generalizations such as relative minimality, and (iii) cross-categorical generalizations not derivable from the first two types. Hierarchical and derivational generalizations are products of universal grammar, but “pure” cross categorical generalizations are learned.

The idea that non-hierarchical, non-derivational constituent order generalizations are not products of UG explains their statistical nature: some patterns are much rarer than others, but all cross-categorical generalizations have crosslinguistic exceptions. Nevertheless, some cross-categorical generalizations are easier to explain in terms of well known patterns of syntactic change than others. Particularly problematic are cross-categorical generalizations involving NP and VP. Reanalysis of nominalizations as main clauses provides one diachronic route for constituent order generalizations across NP and VP, but the scope of such reanalyses remains unclear, in part because reanalyses of this type have often been proposed primarily only in reconstructions.

This paper is based on a combined factor and cluster analysis of 225 parameters (“features”) in WALS, including most of the constituent order parameters in this database (Ono et al 2013). We find that word order parameters are almost completely dominant in the first two main clusters: widely studied parameters such as head/dependent marking do not appear in the highest order parameter clusters, nor do phonological or morphological parameters (other than a few directly related to constituent order). The two highest order clusters group head-initial parameter values (Cluster A) and head-final values (Cluster B). The constituent order parameters in these two highest order clusters include verb-object and P-NP order. Among parameters bearing on NP internal order, they include only N-NP_{GENITIVE} order (the surface head initial order noun-adjective appears in both of the highest ranked clusters).

These properties suggest the following interpretation of cross-categorical word order generalizations across NP, VP, and PP. Reanalyses of nominalizations and relational noun-NP constructions as VPs or PPs carry with them the relative order of head noun and complement, typically realized as a genitive. NP-modifier and NP-demonstrative/determiner orders play a much less significant role in syntactic reanalysis. Put more simply, head-complement order surfaces as a major factor in the kinds of reanalyses that lead to cross-categorical constituent order parallels; head-adjunct order does not.

Selected references

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