

A gradient approach to flexible constituent order

Savithry Namboodiripad
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
savithry@umich.edu

Keywords: constituent order, language contact, language change, experimental methods

Flexibility of constituent order varies across languages, and languages change in how flexible they are, both gaining (Friedman 2003) and losing (Croft 2003) orders. I propose that cross-linguistic variation in flexibility could be gradient, meaning that, rather than there being two types of languages, flexible or rigid, every language exists on a cline, from more to less flexible. I motivate an experimental measure of flexibility which allows for cross-linguistic comparison while also, I argue, preserving a foundational assumption of Radical Construction Grammar (Croft 2001), that all constructions are language-specific. I define what I mean by flexible constituent order in usage-based terms, present experiments from five languages using this measure (Avar, English, Korean, Malayalam, and Spanish), and show that it can capture in-progress rigidification of constituent order (Croft 2003) in the context of language contact.

While corpus frequencies have been the preferred approach to determining flexibility of constituent order (e.g., Dryer 2013), appropriate corpora do not exist for most of the world's languages, and the discourse-specificity of non-canonical orders means that flexibility can be under- or over-described using methods like elicitation (Thomason 2001). In such cases, psycholinguistic methods can complement corpus data, giving a measure of relative entrenchment, for example (Backus 2015). I use acceptability judgment experiments, in which participants rate each variant of the six logical orderings of subject, object, and verb in a neutral discourse context, mixed in with a range of other sentences which vary in their structure. I assume that more acceptable orders are also more entrenched for participants, and so this method yields measures of the differences between more entrenched orders and less entrenched orders. Flexibility is defined as the relative difference in acceptability between orders for each language, with languages that have smaller differences between orders being characterized as more flexible. I show that this measure accounts for known crosslinguistic variation in flexibility (capturing that English is less flexible than Malayalam), while also revealing new crosslinguistic comparisons which can complement existing descriptions (Korean is the least flexible, followed by Malayalam, and Avar is the most flexible of all; data collection for Spanish is ongoing).

Finally, I show that language contact contributes to further entrenchment of SOV order in both Korean and Malayalam, arguing that this is an example of ongoing rigidification of constituent order. I compare the contact situations, and consider why contact might result in reduced flexibility in these cases. The high-contact Malayalam speakers are young people who grew up in Kerala, India where English is an inextricable part of daily life, while the high-contact Korean speakers are English-dominant individuals who grew up in the United States. On analogy with "frontier conditions" posited by Nichols (2017), I discuss the potential for common contact outcomes under "globalization conditions" and "immigrant conditions," thus explaining these similarities in language change via commonalities in patterns of language use. Constituent order has been found to be a highly borrowable aspect of language (Bickel et al. 2017), and contact has been shown to affect flexibility (Heine 2008). Taking a gradient approach to flexibility, considering all constituent orders as relevant (abandoning a core-periphery approach to linguistic analysis), and investigating the effects of ongoing contact on constituent order allows us to (a) work towards a usage-based explanation for why it might be that constituent order is so susceptible to change, and (b) further understand what underlies the typology of constituent order.

Select references

- Backus (2013). A usage-based approach to code-switching: a need to reconcile structure and function.
- Bickel (2017). Areas and universals.
- Croft (2000). *Explaining Language Change: An Evolutionary Approach*.
- Croft (2003). *Typology and Universals*.
- Dryer (2013). On the six-way word order typology, again.
- Friedman (2003). *Turkish in Macedonia and Beyond: Studies in Contact, Typology, and Other Phenomena in the Balkans and the Caucasus*.
- Heine (2008). Contact-induced word order change without word order change.
- Thomason (2001). Contact-induced typological change.