Hixkaryana: The Syntax of OVS Word Order

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The extreme rarity of Object Verb Subject (OVS) word order is a persistent typological puzzle: if there really are languages with basic OVS word order, then OVS must be syntactically derivable; however, there must also be something ‘deviant’ about OVS word order that makes it so scarce. Only a dozen or so languages are attested to have OVS word order (Dryer, 2008; Derbyshire and Pullum, 1981). This paper focuses on one of the best-documented OVS languages – Hixkaryana – to argue that the ‘deviation’ in OVS languages is a marked ordering of inflectional projections, namely, AgrO above AgrS. Data from other OVS languages support this generalization.

Hixkaryana is a Carib language spoken in the Brazilian Amazon by around 600 people (Lewis, 2009). Hixkaryana has OVS word order, illustrated in (1):

(1)  kana y-anim-no biryekomo.
    fish 3subj.3obj-catch-immediatepast boy
    ‘The boy caught a fish.’ (Derbyshire and Pullum, 1981, pp. 194)

That OVS word order in Hixkaryana is basic/unmarked is evidenced by the fact that O, V, and S form a single intonational phrase and, when the arguments are overt, OVS is the preferred order (Derbyshire, 1985). Verbs carry rich inflectional morphology, schematized in (2-a) and exemplified in (2-b):

(2)  a. Agreement-V-Collectivity-Aspect.Tense
    b. y-ama-tx-owni
       3subj.3obj fell collective completive.distantpast
       ‘They felled it.’ (e.g., a tree) (Derbyshire, 1985, pp. 68)

Prefixal person agreement on the verb is a portmanteau morpheme encoding both subject and object agreement. Similarly, the outermost suffix encodes both tense and aspect. To account for the order and position of affixes, this paper proposes the following base order of inflectional projections:

(3)  AgrO >> AgrS >> Tns >> Asp >> Coll >> VP >> vP

The V head raises through v, Coll, and Asp, landing in Tns and picking up these inflectional heads as suffixes. The Agr heads do not syntactically attach to V, but rather phonologically attach at a later stage in the derivation; hence, Agr is a prefix. The fact that subject and object agreement are encoded in a single affix is attributed to head movement of AgrS to AgrO. AgrO is above AgrS to account for the fact that the object (whose landing site is spec of AgrO) does not intervene between Tns (the landing site of the V) and the portmanteau agreement prefix, which is housed in the higher of the Agr projections. (The subject moves through spec of AgrS and then into the A' domain; thus, the subject is not a potential intervener in the Agr projections.)
Previous analyses of Hixkaryana include Cline (1986), who derives OVS by movement of the \( V' \) constituent (containing \( O \) and \( V \)) to \( C \) while the subject is in spec-TP, and Mahajan (2007), who proposes that the object XP cliticizes to \( V \) and raises to \( T \), while the subject stays in spec-vP. Both analyses appeal to the close surface relationship of \( O \) and \( V \). This paper rejects both of these analyses on the grounds that \( O \) and \( V \) are not that closely tied together; for example, the yes/no question particle \( k\text{a}t\) can split \( O \) and \( V \). Lastly, another logically possible analysis – pure \( V \)-raising – is also rejected, as such an analysis could not account for the surface constituency of \( O \) and \( V \), and would require some mechanism to ensure that however high \( V \) raises, \( O \) moves exactly one position higher. Thus, this paper argues that the most plausible way to derive OVS word order in Hixkaryana is by raising the \( V \) head to pick up inflection, then movement of \( \text{Agr}_O \) past the subject.

The proposed ordering of \( \text{Agr}_O \)P above \( \text{Agr}_S \)P is supported by agreement morphology in other OVS languages. Preliminary findings indicate that if an OVS language has both subject and object agreement, \( \text{Agr}_O \) is structurally higher than \( \text{Agr}_S \). This is manifested in the OVS languages Përi (Nilo-Saharan), Arekuna/Taulipang (Carib), and Makuchi (Carib) by object agreement being a prefix and subject agreement being a suffix (Andersen, 1988; Derbyshire, 1985). These languages differ from Hixkaryana in that the \( V \) head raises one head higher, into \( \text{Agr}_S \), picking up subject agreement as a suffix while object agreement phonologically attaches as a prefix at a later stage in the derivation. This generalization needs to be further empirically tested, but opens up promising avenues of new research that have important typological and theoretical repercussions for the field.

Word count: 741

References

Mahajan, Anoop. 2007. Reverse engineering two word order generalizations. Presented at Hong Kong Asian GLOW.