

WORD ORDER FUNCTION TYPOLOGY:
THE AMHARIC CONNECTION

Greta D. Little
University of South Carolina, Columbia

1. Introduction

In her Forum Lecture at the 1976 Linguistic Institute, Sandra Thompson proposed a typology of languages based on the function of word order.¹ Her purpose was two-fold: (1) to investigate the role of word order function as a typological parameter; (2) to examine the implicational relationship between word order function and certain English structures.

Thompson cites two possible functions for word order, pragmatic and grammatical. The distinction is one which provides a continuum along which languages may range from an exclusively pragmatic function to an exclusively grammatical function for word order. These functions she explains in the following terms:

To use word order pragmatically is to use it to distinguish roughly what is "known" (the "old" information) from what is "not known" (the "new" information) in a sentence. The basic distinction between what the hearer can be presumed to know about and what he does not yet know about has been discussed in terms of a variety of parameters: old/new, known/unknown, theme/rheme, topic/comment, and definite/indefinite. [1976:2]

She cites examples in Russian, Mandarin and Spanish where the word order signals pragmatic information. Concerning the grammatical function of word order Thompson says:

It appears that there is a small number of grammatical properties which languages may choose to signal by word order. The most obvious is the marking of subject (and to a lesser extent, object) by position in the sentence. ...There are other gram-

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matical properties which word order can signal...not only basic grammatical relations, but also question, and whether a clause is main or subordinate. Beyond these properties, it remains to be discovered what other essentially grammatical information can be signaled by word order. [1976:6]

Because the positions of the major sentence elements in English are determined by their grammatical relationships virtually to the exclusion of pragmatic factors, English is chosen as the representative language for the grammatical end of the continuum, and examined for the implications of being a "word order grammatical" language. Thompson's examination reveals nine implicational features:

1. Subject Prominent
2. New Information in Sentence Initial Position
3. Use of Definite and Indefinite Articles
4. Advancement Operations = Change in Grammatical Relationships
5. Prevalence of "Structure Preserving" Operations
6. NP V NP Sequences Interpreted as SVO
7. Subject Verb Relation Preserved in Root Transformations
8. Anaphoric Pronouns Required
9. Existence of Empty Subjects

2. Amharic as a Word Order Grammatical Language

In this paper I look at another language at the "word order grammatical" end of the continuum, Amharic. Like English, Amharic tolerates very little variation in word order; unlike English, that order is SOV. By examining an SOV language such as Amharic, we will be in a better position to argue for word order function as a typological parameter of significance. Furthermore, we can begin to determine the degree to which these features operate independently of a particular word order. Finally, we will have a better idea of the kinds of linguistic structures we can hope to explain on the basis of such a typology as well as more precise information about remaining problems.

2.1 Subject prominent. Amharic, like English, is subject prominent. Subject prominent languages have been characterized by Li and Thompson [1976] as having subjects in initial position and as having selectional and agreement restrictions which tie the subject to the verb. Amharic has both these characteristics. In a study of Amharic neutral sentence patterns, F. P. Cotterell [1966] found the following word order patterns:

Subject	Object	Verb	16/16
Subject	Adverbial Modifier	Verb	38/50
Adverbial Modifiers	Subject	Verb	12/50

Sentences illustrating the grammatical connection between subject and verb can be found in the active/passive sentences of 2.4 below.

2.2 New information in sentence-initial position. Like English, Amharic allows new information to serve as subjects, thus occupying the initial position.

- (1) sost : wəmbəročč : ʔkifʔil : allu
 three : chair-pl : in-classroom : are
 'Three chairs are in the classroom.'
 'There are three chairs in the classroom.'
- (2) dabo : ʔt'ərəp'eza : yɨk'k'əmmət'al
 bread : on table : it sits
 'A loaf of bread is sitting on the table.'

2.3 Use of definite and indefinite articles. The development of articles is also related to signalling old and new information. Since that information cannot be conveyed by position in a word order grammatical language, articles to indicate definite and indefinite referents often develop to help establish the distinction. In Amharic the unmarked noun is by far the most common. However, and the indefinite article, is becoming more frequent. Use of the Amharic definite article -u is more restricted than the English 'the'. Its use corresponds more to an English demonstrative; previous mention of the noun is usually a prerequisite for its use. Nevertheless Amharic articles do serve the function outlined by Thompson in helping to distinguish old from new information:

- (3) wəmbəru : ʔkifʔil : allə
 chair-the : in-classroom : is
 'The chair is in the classroom.'
- (4) and : məs'əhaf : ʔtəmari : bet : allə
 one (a) : book : in-student : house : is
 'There is a book in the school.'

2.4 Advancement operations = change in grammatical relationships. Amharic advancement is somewhat different from English advancement. The passive construction is similar to that of English; the direct object is promoted to subject and thereby advanced to sentence initial (subject) position.

Active/Passive

- (5) a. setiyowa : ʔəbəna : səbbərəčč
 woman-the : coffee pot : break-3rd person fem. past
 'The woman broke the coffee pot.'
- b. ʔəbəna : təsəbbərə
 coffee pot : be broken-3rd person masc. past
 'The coffee pot was broken.'

Amharic also possesses a pattern of demotion, or reverse advancement:

Transitive/Causative

- (6) a. wət'u : mok'a
 stew-the : be hot-3rd person masc.
 'The stew is hot.'
- b. and : səw : wət'u : amok'a
 one (a) : person: stew-the : heat-3rd person masc.
 'Someone heated the stew.'

Here the subject becomes the direct object of a derived form of mok'a, i.e. amok'a. Thus the demotion, or reverse advancement procedure moves the subject of the intransitive verb to DO position, allowing a new subject to appear, in this case the agent. In both sentences the verb agrees with its grammatical subject.

2.5 Prevalence of structure preserving operations. Thompson has suggested that the grammatical function of English word order is a reason for the abundance of structures closely resembling the SVO output of Phrase Structure rules. Such structure preserving operations produce sentences like (7a,b, and c):

- (7) a. Linda is fun to speak French with.
 b. George is likely to need a ride.
 c. We believe that rumor to be false.

However, Amharic counterparts to such structures are virtually nonexistent.

In Amharic the overriding concern appears to be maintaining verb final position and not having the subject too far removed from the verb. Therefore, a sentence like (8a), where a sentential modifier has been embedded under the subject NP, has an alternative form, (8b):

- (8) a. siyum : wədəzih : yimət'awin : səwiyye
 Siyum : to here : who is coming-def-acc : man
 məs'əhaf : ayətwal
 book : he saw
- b. wədəzih : yimət'awin : səwiyye : məs'əhaf
 to here : who is coming-def-acc : man : book
 siyum : ayətwal
 Siyum : he saw
 'Siyum saw the book belonging to the man who is coming here.'

One reason this change is possible is the accusative marker -n which is affixed to definite objects. Relative clauses in Amharic are definite and therefore the object is often morphologically indicated.

The most common operation in Amharic is sentence nominalization, and raising or lowering is not normally associated with the process.

2.6 NP V NP sequences interpreted as SVO. The wording of this particular feature is clearly inappropriate for an SOV language. "NP NP V Sequences Interpreted as SOV" would be the Amharic parallel. The claim is that the grammatical role of word order is so strong that noun verb sequences which resemble the predominant sentence order will be interpreted according to that pattern unless there is an overt grammatical marker to register the difference.

In the Cotterell study, 24% of the sentences involving subjects and adverbial modifiers had a modifier + subject + verb, order. The NP's of these modifiers are in oblique cases and are marked as such, preventing any confusion about which NP is the subject:

- (9) ikifil : wambər : allə
 in-classroom : chair : is
 'The chair is in the classroom.'

The i- prefix or preposition eliminates the possibility that kifil is the subject.

In Amharic a more interesting question of NP function identification is found in sentences which are embedded in Object position (8 a & b). With a stated nominal subject, the sentence would be NP NP NP V V. See (10a) below. Such a pattern can obscure the relationships, especially in more complex sentences with several modifiers. It is perhaps this possibility which motivates the OSV pattern of sentences like [NP NP V]_{obj NP subj} V in (10b):

- (10) a. wərk'u yohanis kifilun indəmirəbiŋ yaminnall
 Worku : Yohanis class-def-acc : to disturb he believes
- b. yohanis kifilun indəmirəbiŋ wərk'u yaminnall
 Yohanis : class-def-acc : to disturb : Worku he believes
 'Worku believes Johannes to disturb the class.'

2.7 Subject verb relations preserved in root transformations. Sentences derived by transformations which are not structure preserving, i.e. root transformations, involve movement away from SVO order. In English, however, an unmarked NP is not allowed to precede the verb immediately unless that NP is the subject of the verb or is clearly marked as oblique. Thompson's examples reveal the pattern, especially in (11c), where a pronoun copy rule is necessary to maintain the subject verb pattern:

- (11) a. Scrambled eggs I can't stand to look at in the morning.
 b. Into the room bounced Charles.
 c. He nearly ran over me, that crazy bum.

Root transformations in Amharic are limited. Aside from the OSV alternative discussed in 2.6, the other pattern which does not conform to the basic SOV structure is that involving the copula. Not only are the NP's interchangeable, but the copula itself is movable--a drastic departure from the basic Amharic verb-final pattern. Topicalization, (11a) above,

number, and gender of the subject from the verb form. Thus Amharic subjects are much more clearly indicated than English subjects.

An additional factor of importance is the fact that *issu*, the third person pronoun is not really anaphoric. Third person pronouns are descended from *ras* 'head', with the possessive pronoun suffixed. The original function was to indicate emphasis; indeed emphasis continues to be the difference between (14b) and (14c).

2.9 Existence of empty subjects. In English it is necessary to fill the subject position even though the filler has no lexical meaning:

- (15) a. It's cloudy today.
 b. It bothers me that so many people don't understand Southern English.
 c. There is a funny smell down by the lake.

Similar constructions in Amharic occur with a limited number of verbs which are used impersonally:

- (16) *rasen* : *yamməppall*
 my head-acc : hurts me
 'I have a headache.'
- (17) *kəbbədə* : *irəbotal*
 Kebede, : hungered him
 'Kebede was hungry.'

The verbs have a tense aspect marker which is third person singular, but there is no NP to which it refers. English has sentences with empty subjects; Amharic has subjectless sentences.

3. Conclusion

How well does Amharic conform to the implicational observations that Thompson set up based on English?

The rigidity of Amharic word order centers on the position of the verb, while in English the position of the subject appears to have a greater effect on structure. As a result, Amharic allows greater variation in the position of the NP's. However, the position of those NP's seems to be motivated more by a desire to avoid ambiguity than to convey pragmatic information. The question of how this affects Amharic's position on a word order function continuum must await the investigation of other languages.

A second inconsistent area involves the designation of subject in the absence of an NP. Since Amharic verbs are morphologically differentiated according to person and number, there is no question of an Amharic sentence appearing without some indication of subject. In the sense that those agreement markers are equivalent to English pronouns, Thompson's generalizations are valid. However that equivalence is not absolute. What in English can compare to the expanded Amharic sentence with the pronoun, (14b)?

The problem of agreement marker/pronoun equivalence will undoubtedly come up again if this typological study is extended to other languages.

In spite of the unresolved problems, Thompson's word order typology is a useful one, particularly in terms of its ability to offer explanations for the remarkable frequency of certain structures or operations in languages. For example, it provides a framework which can help explain the high frequency of the cleft sentence pattern in Amharic. Amharic scholars have noticed the phenomenon, but have not had any explanation to offer. H. J. Polotsky [1960:121] remarked:

If one ever makes comparative statistics of the frequency with which the cleft sentence is used in diverse languages, Amharic would have a good chance of taking 1st place.

Thompson's typology provides a logical explanation since this pattern alone seems to bear the major role of indicating pragmatic information in Amharic.

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