VERB POSITION PREDICTS ACCEPTABILITY IN A FLEXIBLE SOV LANGUAGE

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BACKGROUND

Previous research on flexible SOV languages has shown that non-canonical constituent orders result in a lowering of acceptability, presumably due to increased processing difficulty with these orders (Weskott & Fanselow 2011).

Most research on non-canonical orders has focused on the position of the arguments (but see Mishra et al. 2010 on Hindi). Here, we focus on the position of the verb.

In Malayalam (Dravidian), canonical constituent order is SOV, but each of the six logical orders is grammatical and attested.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Order</th>
<th>&quot;BINDU SOLD A MANGO&quot;</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SOV</td>
<td>Bindu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSV</td>
<td>oru maŋa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SVO</td>
<td>Bindu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVS</td>
<td>oru maŋa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VSO</td>
<td>vitu sold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOS</td>
<td>vitu sold</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This explains why SOV would have the highest acceptability. What about the other orders?

METHODS

Acceptability judgment task (rating on a 1-7 scale)
18 university students from central Kerala, India (12 female)

Design:
- 6 conditions (SOV, OSV, SVO, OVS, VSO, & VOS)
- Each participant saw 5 items from each condition; 30 experimental items
- 40 bi-clausal fillers from another sub-experiment
- 10 fillers of very low acceptability
- Counterbalanced (Latin square design)

Stimuli consisted of animate subjects and inanimate objects:
- No object case-marking for these events
- The semantic role of each argument is relatively unambiguous

Audio stimuli presented in Praat:
- Avoid effects of digitopia
- Appropriate intonation associated with each order

DISCUSSION

- Even in a relatively flexible language, there are sharp distinctions in acceptability among non-canonical orders.
- Verb position likely has a major effect on processing in flexible constituent order languages.
- Many interesting research questions arise about how variable verb position within languages affects processing.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE CHANGE

- The widely-attested change from flexible SOV to SVO would seem to involve a shift to a previously less acceptable order
- Flexible constituent order languages often develop more rigid constituent order when in contact with a fixed order language.

How is the acceptability of non-canonical orders affected by experience with another language?

REFERENCES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS


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experimentalsyntax.blogspot.com