

Linguistics 2103: Reading #7

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1. Cross-linguistic Variation in syntax

Different languages vary in a number of ways. Their sound patterns, their word structure rules, their words, all can look quite strange from the perspective of a speaker of another language. But first impressions often fail to recognize the many things that different languages have in common. When we look closely into the syntactic organization of other languages, we often find much that is familiar.

1.1. The form of a grammar of English syntax

The approach to English syntax presented in this course has just a few basic notions:

<i>Phrase structure rules:</i>	X-bar based rules coordinate structure rule
<i>Lexicon:</i>	word sound & meaning category information selectional features

(Beyond these general notions, there are a handful of peculiar grammatical observations are also part of the grammar, i.e. AP and PP modifiers fit on opposite sides of N' ; AP modifiers cannot have complements; NPs cannot be complements to N or A.)

1.2. How can languages vary?

It is possible to imagine that languages would vary drastically in their grammatical properties, so that English grammar would have little in common with Chukchi grammar or Japanese grammar.

Actual languages vary far less than we might expect in their grammatical properties!

Variation in lexical information

- all languages have words, so lexicons of all languages have information about sound and meaning of individual words. NO VARIATION!
- words in all languages are divided into different grammatical categories, such as nouns and verbs NO VARIATION!
- actual words vary widely!

Variation in syntactic categories

Although all languages divide words into different grammatical categories, the categories themselves may differ from language to language.

All languages have nouns and verbs, and perhaps adverbs. For all other categories, considerable variation is found.

Languages without prepositions

For example, Jacaltec, a Mayan language:

- (1) a. xto nay conob.
 went he town
 ‘He went to town.’
 b. ay nay s-wi’ witz.
 is he head hill
 ‘He is on the hill.’

Languages without adjectives

For example, Korean:

- (2) a. Ku chayk-i caymi issta.
 that book-NOM interest exist
 ‘That book is interesting.’
 b. Ku pap-i mas issta.
 that food-NOM taste exist
 ‘That food is tasty.’
 (3) a. Ku pap-i maypta.
 that food be-spicy
 ‘That food-NOM is spicy.’
 b. Cip-i khuta.
 house-NOM be-big
 ‘The house is big.’

Variation in other categories

Many languages do not use distinct words to express ideas which in English are expressed with Determiners or Infl.

- (4) en student, studenten (SWEDISH)
 a student student
 ‘a student; the student’

- a change in the form of the noun indicates definiteness, not the use of the definite article *the*

- (5) Paul chante, Paul chantera (FRENCH)
 Paul sing, Paul sing
 ‘Paul is singing, Paul will sing’

- a change in the form of the verb indicates present progressive or future meanings, rather than the use of an auxiliary verb

Other languages use distinct words to express ideas which require word form changes in English.

- (6) le cousin *de* Paul (FRENCH)
the cousin of Paul
- (7) Paul's cousin
- (8) Ta jiao wo Yingyu yijing henduo nian le. (MANDARIN)
he teach me English already many year PAST
- (9) He **taught** me English for many years.

Missing subject (and object) languages

In some languages, ideas which are expressed with pronouns in English are expressed without any pronoun. For example, in Italian, pronouns are often “missing” in the subject (specifier of TP) position.

Gianni mangia. Mangia.

(Io) mangio. (Tu) mangi.

Languages which are like Italian in this respect are often called “null subject” languages.

In other languages, both subject and object pronouns can be omitted. Chichewa is a language of this type.

- (10) Mikango yanu i-na-zi-thamangitsa mbuzi zathu.
lions your Agr-Past-Agr-chase goats our
‘Your lions chased our goats.’
- (11) Mikango yanu i-na-zi-thamangitsa.
lions your chased
‘Your lions chased them.’

Large-scale differences: fixed word order *vs.* free word order

Some languages exhibit much greater freedom in word order than English.

- (12) a. Ngarrka-ngku ka wawirri panti-rni. (WARLBIRI)
man-ERG PRESENT kangaroo spear-NONPAST
‘The man is spearing the kangaroo.’
b. Wawirri ka panti-rni ngarrka-ngku.
c. Panti-rni ka ngarrka-ngku wawirri.
- (13) Wawirri kapi-rna panti-rni yalumpu.
kangaroo FUTURE-1SG spear that
‘I will spear that kangaroo.’

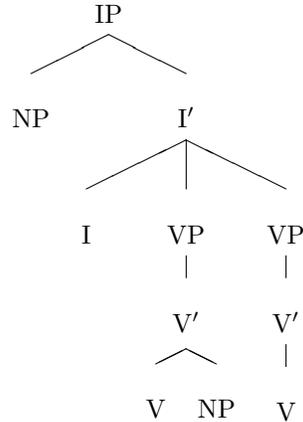
Smaller differences: Variation in VP quantity

- (14) Musa bé lá èbi. (NUPE)
Musa came took knife.
‘Musa came to take the knife.’
- (15) ó mú ìwé wá. (YORUBA)
he took book came

‘He brought the book.’

- some languages allow ‘serial verbs’ (Chinese, Kru, many New Guinea languages)

A possible structure for serial verb languages



Smaller differences: Variation in phrase structure

Much cross-linguistic variation in phrase structure appears to involve minor variations within the X-bar template. Variation can include:

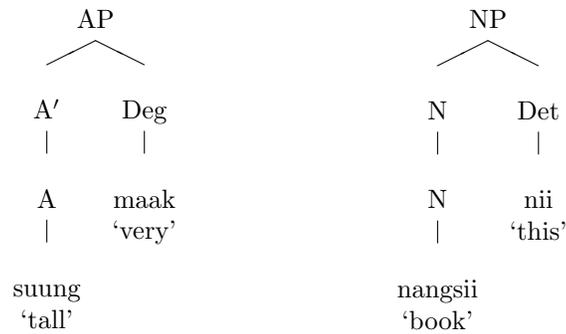
- the position of specifiers
- the position of complements

Variation in specifier positions



- since specifiers are defined as phrases which join with X' to form an XP, this is the only variation possible.

Specifiers on the right: Thai

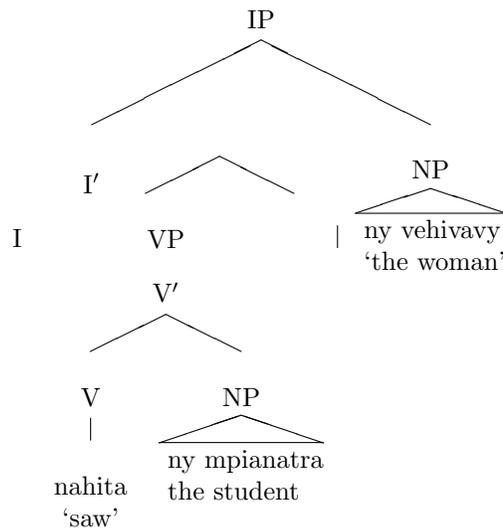
Thai:

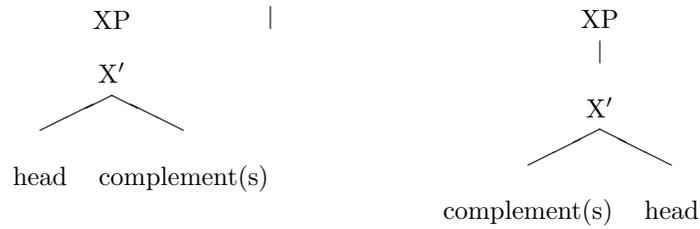
- the word order is difficult to explain in NPs with both specifiers and complements

- (16) ruup nill khong Phim
 picture this of Phim
 ‘this picture of Phim’

Specifiers for IP

- (17) Phim ca klap caak rongrian. (*Thai*)
 Phim will return from school
- (18) Nahita ny mpianatra ny vehivavy. (*Malagasy*)
 saw the student the woman
 ‘The woman saw the student.’

**Variation in complement positions**



A **‘head-initial’ language** is one in which heads precede their complements.

A **‘head-final’ language** is one in which heads follow their complements.

Tinrin (Austronesian) - head-initial order

- (19) u tramwa mwâ ke maija wake.
 I know that you much work.
 ‘I know that you work hard.’
- (20) kò rugi beebòrrò nrâ meîê
 news about drowning POSS woman
 ‘the news about the woman’s drowning’

Japanese - head-final order

- (21) a. Taroo-ga Hanako-ni hana-wo ageta.
 Taroo-NOM Hanako-DAT flower-ACC gave
 ‘Taroo gave Hanako flowers.’
- b. tomodati to
 friend with
 ‘with a friend’