

THE FREE WORD ORDER LANGUAGES: A FOURTH CATEGORY IN THE
GREENBERG SYNTACTIC TYPOLOGY?

Paul J. Hopper
Washington University

In this paper I shall discuss the position of the free word order languages within Greenberg's syntactic typology. It is well known that in some languages the linear arrangement of sentence constituents is subject to a significantly small number of syntactic constraints. For example, Jakobson (1966:269) has pointed out that in the Russian sentence corresponding to English "Lenin quotes Marx" all six of the mathematically possible permutations of Subject, Verb and Object are syntactically well-formed, although of course some of them are rare and unusual. Recently, several linguists have independently raised the question of how these languages are to be fitted into a typology based on the relative ordering of Subject, Verb and Object, as proposed by Greenberg (1966). Three solutions have been proposed, and I will discuss these briefly in turn.

1. E. Staal

In his book Word Order in Sanskrit and Universal Grammar, Staal suggests that the conventional picture of "deep structure" will have to be changed in order to accommodate free word order languages. He proposes an alternative view in which underlying structures are without linear ordering. Linear ordering will then be introduced only in later, stylistic rules. At the same time, Staal discounts the validity of the Greenberg typological framework, stating that Greenberg's universals of word order are "almost always semi-universals (Staal 1967:57). One proposed solution, then, is to reject the syntactic typology outright.

2. R. Lakoff

In her Abstract Syntax and Latin Complementation, R. Lakoff assigns Latin, a free word order language, to the Type II (SVO) languages. Her reasons are the following:

- a. Latin is prepositional rather than postpositional;
- b. The Romance dialects are all SVO, Type II languages;
- c. Type II languages tend to have freer word orders than either Type I or Type III languages. (Lakoff 1968:100)

A second proposed solution, then, is to put the free word order languages into the Type II class.

3. John Ross

John Ross (1967) has surmized that the free word order languages form a special type, characterized by the presence of an extra component, the "stylistic component". Here, "scrambling" rules operate to rearrange constituents in surface structure. Free word order languages would thus comprize a "Type IV".

I shall now put forward some theoretical considerations regarding what is meant by a "free word order language" and discuss the criteria by which such languages may be assigned to existing types. Of the three proposals just discussed, it seems to me that Staal's proposal to reject the entire typology of Greenberg is the least acceptable. Greenberg has brought to light a number of cross-linguistic facts which are too consistent to be ignored, and certainly too significant to be put aside for the sake of a few aberrant languages which do not appear to conform. It would surely be a sounder procedure to inquire why some languages have irregularities of this kind. Robin Lakoff's assignment of Latin to the Type II languages seems arbitrary and unmotivated, and, more importantly, begs some interesting questions. Here again, we may question a methodology which converts problems into non-problems by simple fiat. In sweeping Latin under the rug of the Type II languages, Lakoff ignores some well-known facts about Latin, notably its clear propensity for SOV word order.

Ross' solution is also objectionable. If we set up a further syntactic type for each aberrant language or apparent group of languages, the purpose of the typology is here in the familiar position of, say, the comparatist who is faced with a choice between positing a further proto-phoneme and pressing a closer investigation of phonological relationships which might make this unnecessary.

Jakobson (1966) has indicated some lines along which a notion of "basic" word order may be arrived at in a free word order language. He points out that although in the simple Russian sentence consisting of verb, subject and object all permutations are possible, yet only one of these, namely SVO, is neutral and unmarked. He describes SVO as the "dominant order" in Russian, with other orders as "recessive alternatives", used for some special rhetorical effect. The dominant order is the one acquired first by children, it seems. The distinction may be refined by reference to the work of the Prague School.¹ Linguists of this school have shown that neutral or unmarked surface word order occurs when the complement of the verb is (in their terms) "rhetic", that is, carries the focus of attention of the sentence. This view can be more correctly formulated in the case of free word order languages as follows: the focused element appears as the surface complement of the verb, and the neutral or unmarked word order is that which occurs when this focused element is the direct object. We see something of this kind in English constructions in which alternative word orders are optionally generated, for example:

- a. The students pulled down the flag
- b. The students pulled the flag down

In these two sentences, I take a. to be the neutral one, since the focus is on the direct object, and b. to be marked, since the direct object is not focused. One can think of a. as the answer to a hypothetical question "What did the students do then?" (predicate focus expected), or "What did the students pull down?" (object focus expected), whereas b. would be the appropriate reply to the question "What did the students do to the flag?" (verb focus expected). Notice

that in b. the constituent the flag is understood to be shared by both speaker and hearer; it is part of the "presupposition" of the sentence, or, in Chafe's terms, "old information" (Chafe 1970).²

Freedom of word order is, however, a question of degree and not an absolute. Presumably there are no languages in which every meaningful element of the sentence is completely without positional constraints, nor, for that matter, are there any languages in which every sentence element has one and only one position. This rather obvious fact should itself caution us against making a severe distinction between free word order languages and others, say "fixed" word order languages. The point here is that we may expect that in any language, no matter how arbitrary its word order appears to be, there will always be a dominant, basic, neutral, unmarked word order, whatever one likes to call it, and it is highly probable that this word order will coincide with that in which the complement of the verb is the focused constituent. Looked at from this point of view, the neutral word order of Latin was SOV, as has been shown clearly by Marouzeau (1922-53) in his studies of Latin word order. I believe that it can be shown that this situation is a relic from Proto-Indo-European, and that the expected concomitant syntactic phenomena listed by Greenberg are still remotely recoverable from the earliest stages of Latin and Italic: postpositions, preposed relative clauses, precedence of the standard in the comparative construction, the placing of the adnominal genitive before the noun and a number of other surface syntactic features characteristic of SOV languages increase in frequency the further back one goes in the history of Latin.

The notion that languages may shift their typological allegiance in the course of time, which Lakoff finds so distasteful, is by no means a fantastic one. Emmon Bach (in press) has shown that Amharic, a Semitic language genetically of the VSO type (Type I), has "captured" SOV characteristics from neighboring Cushitic languages. It is my own view that such a shift in the Indo-European languages would account for a number of puzzling phenomena. One is the confusing and contradictory evidence concerning the word order of Proto-Indo-European. At one time or another, various scholars have defended all three basic types: VSO, SVO, and SOV. John Ross (in press) has recently argued for SVO ordering in Proto-Indo-European. He points to the wide spread of this type in the modern Indo-European area, and the behavior of "gapping rules" in those modern dialects (e.g. Hindi) which are overtly Type III. Yet an excellent case can also be made for assigning Proto-Indo-European to the SOV type, as does Calvert Watkins (1964) (to mention one recent adherent of this view).

These and several other problematical questions are illuminated by the theory that an original language of Type III underwent a gradual typological change at the same time as it diversified geographically and dialectically. One may speculate that Proto-Indo-European once belonged to a large Sprachbund of West Central Asia, comprising other great language families which at that time were almost certainly of the SOV type (Type III): Uralic, Altaic, and Dravidian. The Western reaches of this Sprachbund, including Indo-European and the western Uralic languages, began, perhaps as a result of contacts with other linguistic

groups in Europe, to shift to the SVO type (Type II).

At one stage in this shift the order of sentence elements was quite free. I will illustrate this with a documented example, again from Latin. The facts are described in an article written in 1932 by B. Rosenkranz, "Zur Stellung des attributiven Genetivs im Italischen". Rosenkranz showed that in the very earliest documents of Latin, and in the Italic dialects, the genitive adjunct preceded the noun. At a slightly later date, both positions are found, but the postposition is the marked one. In the classical period, again both positions are found, but the prior position is now the marked one, and the postposition is neutral. In the modern Romance dialects, of course, the postposition is the only possible one. In the two intermediate stages, the word order of noun and genitive adjunct was, from a syntactic point of view, "free". In other words, as we would expect, languages do not suddenly change their typological membership, but go through gradual stages in which word order is to a greater or lesser degree arbitrary, before finally consolidating into one fixed order.

Free word order languages may, then, from a historical point of view be regarded as intermediate stages between two syntactic types. Their synchronic position is thus anomalous, but the solution which I would propose here is that they be regarded as belonging to whichever type their neutral (i.e. unmarked) word order with respect to subject, verb and object demands, regardless of other factors such as concomitant phenomena (e.g. existence of prepositions in a surface SOV-language). Aberrant features of this kind can be made into the basis of important diachronic studies.

NOTES

¹The bibliography is quite large. Some of the journals relevant here are: Brno Studies in English, Travaux Linguistiques de Prague, Prague Studies in Mathematical Linguistics.

²This book has not been received at the time of writing.

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