

M. M. JOCELYNE FERNANDEZ-VEST

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Word order in context: Information structure, a revolutionary approach to Uralic typology?

0. Word Order

The importance of Word Order (WOORD) is inherent in the mere language function, since the „caractère linéaire du signifiant” is, along with the double side of the sign, an essential characteristic of what Saussure called „the nature of the language sign” („Cours”, 1.1.3.). An important sub-category referred to about the world languages is the free word order category, which Uralic languages are supposed to belong to, opposed to the fixed word order set, which Indo-European (IE) languages belong to, at different degrees.

Just to take one of the Uralic (U) – Finno-Ugric (FU) languages, Finnish, one can mention that a legend of supreme freedom was attached to the Finnish WOORD, at least until the 70s of the 20th century. This enviable reputation of freedom was not totally usurped but, while on the one hand it was little denied by Finno-Ugric grammarians, who owned very few pages in their books to the problem – apart from dialectal considerations on „unusual word orders”, on the other hand one could soon notice that the reputation was based on some kind of misunderstanding. WOORD does not have in the FU languages the syntactic function of identifying the constituents which it has in many IE modern languages.

Whereas in French you cannot reverse the order of constituents

(1) „Pierre a battu Jean” > „Jean a battu Pierre”

without reversing thereby the hierarchy of Actants, in Finnish you can say, with the same potential meaning [„signifiante” in Saussurian terms]

(2) Pekka löi Hannua = Hannua löi Pekka

But the actual meaning [„signification” in Saussurian terms] i.e. the semantic load in a communicative perspective will not be the same. In other terms, the only freedom which can be recognized the Finnish WOORD is its *availability* at the message level, thanks to its numerous specific case markers.

WOORD and Uralic typology

1.1 Finno-Ugric WOORD and foreign linguists

One must emphasize here, even briefly, the role played by „non native linguists”, for the recognition of the problem. Among the earliest ones was the French Aurélien Sauvageot who had a vivid, admittedly literary-based knowledge of several FU languages, and strong intuitions about them.

As early as 1949, one can read in Sauvageot's *Esquisse de la langue finnoise*, chapter „Expressions”, sub-chapter „WOORD”:

La réalité est que l'ordre des mots tend à ne plus exprimer les relations syntaxiques que pour se spécialiser dans la seule tâche de faire valoir la signification impliquée dans la phrase (...). L'ordre des mots assume donc en partie la tâche de présenter la pensée sous des aspects d'intensité variable.” (p. 203)

L'ordre des mots tend de plus en plus à n'assurer que la fonction expressive à l'exclusion de la fonction syntagmatique. (p. 214)

If we leave aside the comparative aspects – literary sources and diachronic perspective – of the chapter, we have here a clear vision of what will later be subsumed by „thematisation” or „topicalisation”. Sauvageot explains that what should be studied systematically is the variation of word order and what it adds to a „simply enunciative” (assertive) utterance. He also avoids the term „neutral”, which is wisely done, thinking of the numerous misuses of this term in linguistics. Apart from generative approaches – until recently centred on syntactic structures – and the reflection devoted to „Existential sentences”, it took several decades before the WOORD problem was analysed and theoretized more systematically in Uralic languages.

1.2. Uralic WOORD and „native” linguistics

The WOORD problem is mentioned in several general presentations of the Uralic languages from the 60s of the 20th century, even if thoroughful studies are still to be waited for in most languages.

Tauli 1966 contains a chapter about „A tendency towards a progressive word order” [in U languages]. According to Tauli, the U languages would have accepted early the dominant norm *Dt* – *Dd*, which was applied to all categories of words, and even appeared before the difference between N and V (p. 98). The „deviations” observed in some Western U languages are probably secondary and can be explained by the influence of IE languages. The *progressive* WOORD is thus of IE origin, whereas the original WOORD of (reconstructed) proto-Finno-

Ugrian must have been *regressive*, as is still the case in Eastern U languages and Altaic languages. The „freest” U languages, from the point of view of WOORD are: Finnish, Lappish, Mordvin, Zyrian, Hungarian (p. 99). In Lappish, the normal position of the Object is, in most dialects, *before* the verb (p. 104).

Korhonen 1981, *Johdatus lapin kielen historiaan*, owes a few (5) pages to the end to the syntax – after a long diachronic presentation of the phonology. The sequence Dt – Dd is only a special application of the basic rule already found in the Proto-FU sentence, with a SOV WOORD. The WOORD to be found nowadays in „mountain Lappish” (later Northern Sami), with a predicate generally *preceding* the complement, e.g.

(3) Áhčči attii guossái murjjiid

„Father gave the guest berries”

is the result of a *syntactic change*. The basic rule of Proto-FU has thus been changed: SOV > SVO.

The Sami WOORD in K. Nielsen’s Grammar

In the Samic domain, Konrad Nielsen’s „Handbook” (*Lærebok i lappisk*) from 1926, reprinted in 1979, is still considered as a fundamental grammar of Northern Sami.

The chapter about WOORD (N. *Ordstillingen*) comes late in the book – even if some sequence phenomena appear earlier in the relation of determination, or in the postposition phrases. It is the last chapter of the IVth Part (Syntax, 115 p.), wedged in a few pages about Ellipsis and „Practical advices for translators”: the chapter has all in all 9 pages (415–423), which is very limited compared with the Phonology (60 p.) and Morphology (122 p) chapters, but even with Composition and Derivation (106 p.). Following the general method adopted for the book, this chapter delivers no absolute rules but gives a long series of examples devoted to illustrating the diversity of possible schemes. The examples should be authentic – the author had several informants available while writing the Grammar – and most of them can be still considered as natural today. The main point is that, taken out of a corpus without any precision on either the conditions of production or even the immediate context, these examples give an impression of extreme „elasticity”, of unlimited variation, thus comforting the above mentioned myth of „a total freedom of WOORD in FU languages”. The chapter is subdivided into 2 parts: A/ The rules and exceptions valuable for all sentences – main clauses and subordinate clauses – in which the speaker „does not try to emphasize a particular element”, in other words „neutral” sentences, even if the term is not used (p. 415–418). B/ The different

devices available for highlighting the constituents (p. 418–424), in other words the marked WORDS.

A. Neutral sentences

Among other basic rules, the Subject is set *before* the predicate in affirmative declarative sentences, and in „partial” interrogative sentences, but *after* the predicate in total questions (with the interrogative particle *-go*); when the predicate is an imperative form, e.g.

(3) *vástit don* [answer-you]

[my remark: it does not necessarily mean „answer, you!” (exclusive selection) but for instance a slightly insisting form (= see Fi. *vastaapa!* „answer now!”); when the S is an infinitive or a whole clause; in quotation clauses; in main clauses preceded by a subordinate clause, specially when they contain a modality (can / must).

B. Marked sentences

According to Nielsen, the general rule for highlighting a word is *fronting*¹. What is indeed remarkable is that, in spite of no concrete reference to the discourse context, the explanations provided seem to be a kind of pre-echo of the discourse analyses still to come, and specially the Information Structure approach. Just a few examples:

1/ about the Object preceding the Verb

(5) *Mon áiggun njálaid vuolgit bivdit* „I intend foxes to go [and] hunt”

>

(5’) *Njálaid mon áiggun vuolgit bivdit* („When the O is fronted, it is emphasized, and it is supposed as already known tha the person in question intends to go hunting”)

2/ about the right detachment

„if the S is set at the end of the sentence, it shows that it has already been mentioned, or that the speaker adds it to complete his sentence”

– which corresponds nowadays to what is called post-Rheme, „Mneme” in my terminology (see 2. below).

¹ An obvious lack for the modern general linguist studying these examples is the total absence of 3 factors fundamental for oral speech: the weight of the words, the rythm of the speech flow, the prosody (/ intonation). But this would be an anachronic sort of critic.

C. Focalization

The absence of reference to a general frame of discourse analysis becomes obvious with the presentation of the numerous so called „focalizations”. For instance, to „focalize” the verb, one can say:

(7) *Diedán mon gal* (know-I-yes) „ Oh yes I know ”

[which is [my comment] by no means a focalization, but a simple answer of rhematic type to a question with a predicate as the theme.]

2. Information structuring

The terminology introduced above refers to a theory and methodology developed within general linguistics mostly during the second half of the XXth century, even if its European roots go back to the Prague School some decades earlier.

Of the three dominant interpretations of communicative categories (*a/ semantic*, suggesting that Theme/Topic establishes a relationship of aboutness, *b/ informational*, rendering Theme/Topic as *given information*, *c/ syntactic*, assuming that Theme/Topic constitutes a *special point of departure* that is associated with *initial position* – see Gómez-González 2000), one can choose to favour the *informational interpretation*. Notions discussed in connection with it have been the Principle of Functional Sentence Perspective (PFSP), launched by the Prague School, shared knowledge, activation, accessibility and saliency (Lambrecht 1994). The clefting process in particular has been analysed as a device for marking deviations from the unmarked predicate-focus (or topic-comment) articulation (see Lambrecht 2004 for French).

2.1. A model for Information Structure (IS)

Originally put forward by the pragmatic investigation of a Finno-Ugric oral language, Northern Sami, then extended to the analysis of French, Finnish and English corpora of diverse genres (comics, cartoons, film dialogues, scientific discourse), the two basic thematic strategies I have gradually theoretize are the following:

- *the binary strategy 1* (Theme – Rheme), with a topic currently marked by prejection, characteristic of oral discourse, and
- *the binary strategy 2* (Rheme – Mneme), which often makes it possible to complete an iconic (circular) cohesion of the text.

The study has been conducted along two paths, concentrating alternatively on the construction of monolingual or bilingual meaning (Fernandez-Vest 2001, 2004c).

This analysis of enunciative constituents meets the principle of a *triple organization of the utterance* recognized by several theoreticians (Pierce; Danes 1974; Hagčge 1978), but it states the hierarchical and chronological primacy of Level 1, the enunciative level, on Level 2, the morphosyntactic one. My choice of a textual and interactional definition of the Theme/Topic („what is spoken about”) and Rheme/Focus („what is said about it”), implied the recognition of a third element, the *Mneme*, which is characterized by formal properties (a post-Focus marked by a flat intonation) and semantic ones (supposedly shared knowledge, affective modulation, etc). This third element, partly similar to the „Antitopic” of construction grammar (Lambrecht 1994: 184–191), differs from it by its frame of analysis (the text rather than the utterance) and by its levels of assignment (situated on the enunciative/pragmatic level, not syntactic), which naturally induces differences in the exploitation of the corpora (Fernandez 1994a: 197–200, 2004a).

3.2. Information Structure in an orally transmitted language: Northern Sami

A. Old Sami

Northern Sami (*sámeigiella*, previously „Mountain /Norwegian Lappish”, the majority language (75% of the speakers) of the Samic branch, spoken by around 30 000 speakers in the Northern regions of Norway, Sweden, and Finland, was until the standardization of its orthography (1979) an orally transmitted language. Northern Sami can be characterized, as most of the Uralic languages, as a synthetic and agglutinating language with some morphophonological regular alternations, a rich morphology (specially the derivation system), multiple and productive devices for spatial structuration, a case syntax with a weak verbo-nominal polarity.

The discourse typological characteristics presented here are based on a large corpus of orally transmitted Sami (10 hours of recorded speech, 106 speakers), collected through several field-works in Northern Finland (Utsjoki) and Northern Norway (Finnmark) between 1975 and 1982. Beside Sami, the corpus included also for the sake of comparison Finnish (12 hours, 59 speakers) and Finland’s Swedish (5 hours, 35 speakers) recorded discourses (Fernandez-Vest 1987: 125–133).

- Information strategies

On the pragmatic level, information strategies shaped by orality are prominent: numerous discourse particles, a paratactic subordination. WOORD serves mainly pragmatic aims: information structure and emphasis. The neutral word order (SVO) is found in assertive utterances, but any word can be

highlighted through *fronting*. Emphasis is signalled by an intensity stress and/or by Discourse Particles (DIPs) :

- (7) - *GÁNNÁHA bat* (DIP) *dan bohccobierrgu suovastit !* „Oh indeed (DIP) it IS WORTH this–reindeermeat–to smoke!” !

These DIPs give rhythm to the utterance and modalize it; along with prosody they connect utterances. In impromptu total questions, the DIPs are in fact more frequent than the grammaticalized interrogative particle *-go* (see Fi. *-k0*). This variable illocutionary force corresponds to a variable degree of implied activity. Some DIPs articulate the dialogue (e.g. *gal* „yes, indeed” ; *na* „well, now”, which opens questions and answers), others topicalize the first element, often with a syntactic specialization (e.g. *dat* – both a particle, a personal and a demonstrative pronoun – topicalizes the subject, *dal* topicalizes a verbal predicate or a local argument). DIPs can even occur in the 2nd binary thematic structure (Rheme – Mneme, see 2. above).

- (8) - *Jo / dat dat gal álge dan áigge / mohtor-fatnasat gal* --> „Yes, they indeed began in that time, the motorboats yes”

• **WOORD, DIPs and spatial representation**

The study of several Sami itineraries, their verbal description and the negotiation about them, has made it possible to test some of the tendencies put forward by cognitive research upon the constitution of representations. This type of negotiation illustrates the construction of a referent model and the shifting of the deictic center, operated by the combining of deictic markers and discourse particles. See for instance a dialogue initiated by the questioned evaluation of a distance, in which the questions and answers appeared as variants of assertive utterances, which resulted from the dominating role played by the Discourse Particles, 44 DIPs for 16 turns:

- (9) *Man GUHKKI dás dáppe dohko du báikái Báđošii / diedátgo olu / dáppe girkobáikkés?* – How far from here exactly here to there to your home in Bados / do you know how much / from here from the market-place? (Fernandez-Vest 1987: 585–589).

A comparison of the DIPs in the three main languages spoken in Finland, Sami, Finnish and Swedish, made evident that they are an essential trace left in synchrony by a diachronically codified oral expression (*ibid.*: 599–603).

-> The main idea of „embodied cognition” seems to benefit directly by the study of DIPs: the deictic (often spatial) origin of most usual DIPs could be related to a general process of metaphoric structuration of our mental world.

B. Sami as a new written language

In the recent evolution observed during the last decade through an additional corpus made up of recorded dialogues and newspapers², two main tendencies are prominent:

1/ Regarding the *general articulation of the dialogues*, DIPs have become an „endangered species”: many DIPS are already disappearing, several are restricted to limited functions. The main survivor, the already mentioned homonymous (/ polysemic) *dat* stands out as a strong candidate for the third grammaticalization chain which I have proposed to add to the two already defined, as resulting from the interaction of cognitive and pragmatic operations, by theoreticians of grammaticalization, i.e.

- (10) 1/ concrete localization > possessive / existential clause
 2/ demonstrative > personal pronoun > definite article (Heine 1992)
 3/demonstrative > personal pronoun > nuclear discourse particle (Fernandez-Vest 2000b).

This proposition, based on the analysis of a newly written language, corroborates some of the latest developments of grammaticalization theories (e.g. Traugott 2004) and also reminds us of that DIPs are central to many domains of the syntactic theory: they play an important role both *synchronically*, to distinguish expression devices of genres and styles and *diachronically* as landmarks of the cognitive processes involved in exclusively oral vs. written/mediatic expressions (Fernandez-Vest 2003b).

2/ Regarding the function of *WOORD*, a preliminary result of this study has been that the Sami press of the last decade (Newspapers *Min Áigi* and *Áššu* in Norway, periodical *Sápmelaš* in Finland) offers frequent occurrences of constructions influenced by the majority languages, Norwegian in particular, even in reported speech. As for the topicalized constructions, areal structure shift happens as the result of an imperfectly mastered use of *WOORD*, increased by the decline of DIPs. Even the most vivid of the ancient DIPs, the already discussed DIP *dat*, is generally replaced by an analytic construction device:

- (11)– Dát lea Heaika, gii ássá duon dálus „It is Heaika, who lives in that house”pro Heaika dat ássá duon dálus

Whereas the lexical evolution has been relatively well controlled, and many

² My data-base has been enriched with around 6 hours of dialogues recorded in different situations – several of them borrowed from other sources (Finnish and Norwegian Sami Radio, Finnish Literature Society Archive) – and monolingual Sami or bilingual newspapers from Finland and Norway.

spontaneously imported modern lexems of Scandinavian /international origin have been gradually replaced by Finno-Ugric neologisms, it seems that the pragmatic domination of Scandinavian languages has been reinforced by the adoption of a written norm. The topicalized constructions, which still twenty years ago showed great similarities between Sami and Finnish, grow rapidly apart in the two languages (Fernandez-Vest 1982, 2002, 2004b).

A frequency comparison will be conducted, but some experiments have already been arranged, including reduplicated story-telling – a written version produced after the oral one – by middle-aged Sami speakers (partially educated in written Sami), e.g.

(12) ORAL *Muhto maid^a dat^b dákkar^c / báikegoddálaš boahdá gi lea ollu mehciid johtán^d / dathan^{ef} gal^g arvinge^h fidne dola galⁱ. (...)* „But what^a then^b such a^c / local guy arrives who has a lot wandered in the forest^d / he^e certainly^f yes^g even^h in rainy weather⁺ / gets a fire yesⁱ. (...)

WRITTEN *Muhto go boahdá^a ollu mehciid johtán^d báikegoddálaš, sonhan^{ef} gal^g fidne arvinge^h dola. (...)* „But when arrives^a a much-in the forest-having-wandered^d regional guy, he^e certainly^f yes^g gets even^h in rainy weather fire. (...) (Fernandez-Vest 2003a)

If the rarity of actualizers and discourse particles, and the change of interclausal cohesion (conjunctions instead of iconic devices), have been confirmed, a subject for further research is the change of WOORD type (more analytic), partly compensated by a written-style use of verbo-nominal clauses.

4. WOORD in context – Universals

What do we know nowadays about the Uralic WOORD?

We know that Uralic languages can principally be divided into three main groups (SOV, SVO – Finnic, (partly) Samic – both (Hungarian and Permian languages)? (e.g. Comrie 1988).

We also know that the freedom of WOORD is restricted at the information level. The Finnish and Sami WOORD SVO for instance, even if generally found in „neutral” assertive sentences, is currently modified not only by the type of speech act (/ sentence) used, e.g. questioning, but also by the information strategy chosen. Besides, the dimension oral-written has to be taken into account: the WOORD is more sensitive to the written focalization, as it cannot be backed up by the prosody.

All in all, an urgent thing to do is thus to revisit the domain of WOORD, and ask the fundamental questions : what is a „basic order” (see Mithun 1987)?

What is a „neutral” sentence? This revision will naturally have to profit by the essential lessons of Corpus Linguistics, including the study of frequencies in correlation with large corpora. In Sami, as we saw, IS was totally dominating in the oral tradition, using synthetic asyndetic constructions but there is nowadays a kind of weakening of this oral style, the devices used include more analytic constructions which bridge the gap with the surrounding IE models (Fernandez-Vest 2002, 2004b).

Finally, what is the main interest for Uralic languages of this type of WOORD analysis, based on an Informational conception of the sentence – and the text?

Let us say that, if not „revolutionary”, the Information Structure theory has brought about a less biased approach to languages with a rich morphology: validated by their recently discovered WOORD constraints as core members of the world language family, the Uralic languages are from now on empowered to more actively contribute to our investigation of the dialectic relation between Typology and Universals.

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Summary

In contrast with the classical studies on Word Order (WOORD), the attention paid during the last decades to the co- and contextual dimensions of utterances have brought about a real revolution in General and Uralic linguistics. This does not mean yet that pragmatics is automatically taking into account in the typological theories - and the existence of reference grammars is not obligatorily an advantage for minor languages. In the Samic domain for instance, Konrad Nielsen's „Handbook” (*Lærebok i lappisk*) from 1926, reprinted in 1979, is still considered as the fundamental grammar for Northern Sami. However, how rich

and inventive an ethnolinguistic work it is, it inevitably failed to treat utterances in their dialogical context, and thereby to explain the multiple choices of WORDS available. Indeed, in Sami oral corpora from the pre-orthographic period the word sequence appears to be typically ordered in a series of rhythmic groups, directly correlated to the speaker's cognitive processes. Modern research has also shown that WORD is a secondary factor in impromptu speech : not only presuppositions and pragmatic implications have a more important role than syntactic functions, but the order of the sequence is subordinated to prosody and Discourse Particles (DIPs). After an intrusion into linguistic diachrony via the typological evolution of an oral language becoming written (e.g. the DIPs and deictic markers as endangered specieses in Northern Sami), the aim of the paper will be backed up by excerpts of non standard Finnish corpora (conversations between Californian immigrants of Finnish descendance). It should become obvious from these comparisons that the preliminary choice of a theoretical frame distinguishing two levels of analysis (enunciative vs. morpho-syntactic) is relevant for putting the study of WORD on the right track. The recognition of Information Structure as a basic component for communication both questions our inherited mythology on the originality of Uralic WORD and confirms its status as a core domain of Uralic linguistics.