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Armenian

Word order and information structure

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Basic word order in Armenian

Armenian has been proposed to have both OV and VO as basic orders. This is especially true of Eastern Armenian (WALS shows Western Armenian as OV, but Eastern Armenian as having 'no dominant order').

Arguments in favour of OV:

- Preverbal position of bare objects

- Preverbal position of objects in VP idioms

- Preverbal position of low adverbs

- Preverbal main focus position

Basic word order in Armenian

Arguments in favour of VO:

- Many **traditional grammars** present it as the canonical or "recommended" order (Abrahamyan 2004, Arakelyan 1958, etc.).

- It is preferred for **definite objects** (see e.g. Dum-Tragut 2009: 562). Siewerska (1988): basic word order is "[...] the order that occurs in stylistically neutral, independent, indicative clauses with full noun phrase (NP) participants, where the subject is definite, agentive and human, the object is a definite semantic patient, and the verb represents an action, not a state or an event.").

- **Longer indefinite DOs** also prefer postverbal position, as do **clausal and infinitive complements**, so it could be said that this position is preferred in a larger number of contexts, and is thus basic (Samvelian, Faghiri & Khurshudyan, to appear).

Information structure

In fact, word order in Armenian is determined by information structure more than grammatical relations.

What does John drink?

TOPIC	COMMENT	
John	drinks	beer
BACKGROUND		FOCUS
link [to previous discourse]	tail [rest of background]	focus

(Vallduví 1990: 51)

- Topic: what the utterance is 'about', usually given, definite.

- Focus: the non-presupposed part of the utterance. Main intonational peak always on focus.

Stress and auxiliary

In Armenian, the main intonational peak is usually on the first constituent of what could be described as the predicate (Armenian has pro-drop, so there is often no overt subject). In Eastern Armenian, the clitic auxiliary attaches to this constituent:

The verb:

(1) KEREL   em.
     Eat.PPT be.SG.PRS
     I ate (it).

A 'preverb' (part of a complex verb):

(2) KUL em   tvel.
     PVB be.1SG.PRS give.PPT
     'I swallowed (it)'

A (non-topical) object:

(3) MI KTOR HACʿ em   kul   tvel.
     One piece bread be.1SG.PRS PVB give.PPT
     'I swallowed a piece of bread'

Stress and auxiliary

A VP adverb (e.g. manner, not sentential, see Kahnemuyipour & Megerdoomian 2011):

(4) ARAG em mi ktor hacʻ kul tvel.
Quickly be.1SG.PRS one piece bread PVB give.PPT
'I quickly swallowed a piece of bread.'

A non-topical subject:

(5) MARD ê ekel.
Person be.3SG.PRS come.PPT
'A person/someone has come'

Not just unaccusative/non-agentive (as in Kahnemuyipour & Megerdoomian 2011):

(6) (Surik –i -n) MOCAK ê kcel
Surik-DAT-DEF mosquito be.3SG.PRS bite
'A mosquito bit Surik'

'Topical' constituents

Agentive/experiencer subjects and specific objects (i.e. elements that can typically be topics) generally precede this 'predicate', each often having its own prosodic phrase with a low-rising contour:

(7) (Davitʿ-ə) (Nune-i-n)   GIRKʿ ê   nvirel.
      David-DEF Nune-DAT-DEF book be.3SG.PRS give.PPT
      'David gave Nune a book.'

When this type of constituent has narrow focus on it, the stress and the auxiliary go on it:

(8)   (a) Davitʿ-ə NUNE-I-N ê girkʿ nvirel.
      (b) DAVITʿ-N ê Nune-i-n GIRKʿ nvirel.

Non-topical, non-focused objects generally stay in position when a 'higher' constituent is focused.

'Topical' constituents

When the object is topical, it can precede the narrow focus subject:

(9)   Nunein DAVITˤN ê girkˤ nvirel

Non-topical/bare objects can't do this:

(10) *Girkˤ DAVITˤN ê Nunein nvirel

Topical constituents, object or subject, can also follow the main predicate:

(11)   NUNEIN ê girkˤ nvirel Davitˤə.

(12)   DAVITˤN ê girkˤ nvirel Nunein.

(13)   #DAVITˤN ê Nunein nvirel girkˤ.

The fact that this concerns topical (i.e. mainly definite) referents is one reason why postverbal position is associated with definite rather than indefinite objects.

Preverbal and postverbal focus

When a bare object has narrow focus, it preferably appears preceding a VP adverb (14), rather than following it, as it would normally do (15) (see Kahnemuyipour & Megerdoomian 2011, 2017):

(14)   Ara-n FUTBOL ê šat xałum.
         Ara-DEF football be.3SG.PRS much play.IPT

'Ara plays FOOTBALL a lot.'

(15)   Aran šat ê futbol xałum.

Focus could be envisaged as potentially moving to the left edge of the predicate, as has been proposed for some types of focus in Georgian (see Borise 2019).

But postverbal focus is also possible, especially with definite objects:

(16)   Ara-n šat ê sirum IR ŠNERIN.
         Ara-DEF much be.3SG.PRS 3SG.GEN dog-PL-DAT-DEF
         'Ara loves HIS DOGS very much.'

(note that the auxiliary cannot cliticize onto postverbal elements)

Head-final vs. head-initial constituents

In Borise's (2019) study of focus in Georgian, it is proposed that constituents 'higher' than VP are head-initial, while 'lower' constituents are head-final.

In (Eastern) Armenian, too, all complementizers are initial, and, as we have seen, the auxiliary cliticizes onto the initial element of the predicate.

It has been proposed, both for Armenian and other languages, that definite/specific objects are 'higher' in the structure than bare/non-specific indefinites (see Tamrazian 1994, Öztürk 2005, etc.), when preverbal they precede VP adverbs and aux, and generally have more freedom of movement away from the verb (17, 9, 11, 12):

(17) Ara-n   ir   šnerin   šat   ê   sirum.
      Ara-DEF 3SG.GEN dog-PL-DAT-DEF much be.3SG.PRS love.IPT
      'Ara loves his dogs very much'

Proposal: V and its modifiers VP adverb and bare object (denotes kind, modifies verb meaning) form a head-final constituent, but the constituent including 'higher' objects is head-initial, hence OV preferred for indefinite, VO for definite.

VO: cognitive and areal factors

VO may have cognitive advantages: two similar constituents the same side of the verb are dispreferred (Polinsky & Ueno 2009, Skopeteas & Verhoeven to appear), subjects are most often definite, definite object more likely to be similar to subject. See also Gibson et al. (2019: 379): SOV may switch to SVO "when subject and object are confusable". Samvelian, Faghiri & Khurshudyan (to appear) suggest that this is one factor behind the persistence of SVO order for definite objects in the history of Armenian, despite the fact that other constituents have shifted to head-final order.

There is also an areal dimension, e.g. postverbal DOs more common in Turkic languages spoken in the Southern Caucasus than those spoken elsewhere: Stilo 2014 for varieties of Azerbaijani spoken in Azerbaijan (more VO) and Iran, Schröter 2019 for Urum (more VO than Turkish), possibly linked to contact with Russian.

It has also been claimed that there is a general typological tendency for languages to drift towards VO order (Li 1977, Givón 1979, Gell-Mann and Ruhlen 2011, among others).

ideas

- What determines word order in a language you know? Does information structure play a role? How?

- Do you know any languages with both head-final and head-initial constituents? Is there any pattern in the distribution of these constituents?

- Do you know any languages whose word order patterns have shifted over time? Have they shifted towards or away from VO order? What factors are proposed to have played a role?

- The EA clitic auxiliary has parallels in several other languages of the area (see Stilo & Noorlander 2015 and references therein). Investigate its functions, history, and/or behaviour in one or more of these languages/language families.

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