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Abstract

Word Order in Sign Languages

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Word order -- actually constituent order -- in sign languages is fairly flexible compared to word order in most spoken languages. The reasons for this are complex, but it must be noted that word order in sign languages is not a free-for-all; rather, there are specific conditions and restrictions on noncanonical orders. In the past, researchers, including my own work from 40 years ago, have mostly talked about the order among subject, verb, and object, however, restricting oneself to just the order of subject, verb, and object misses out on some important generalizations.. I prefer to think more generally about the order of specifier, head, and complement. The reason is that normally, if for example verbs precede their objects in a language, then adpositions (prepositions in this case) will also precede their objects, though it is possible to have certain kinds of heads pattern differently; e.g., it has been argued that in ASL functional heads follow their complements while lexical heads precede them. The issue of word order (or constituent order) is further complicated by the greater syntactic simultaneity that is found in sign languages.

I would like to mention a few cautions that especially apply to sign languages in particular, though they may also apply to all languages in some contexts. First, in any language, it is important to distinguish between basic, **underlying** word order and **most frequent** word order. For example, in both Japanese and American sign languages verbs tend to occur on the surface at the end of the sentence, but for very different reasons with very different constraints due to differences in underlying order. In the case of word order perturbations in ASL, movement from underlying position is often marked by a particular non-manual behavior such as topicalization via eyebrow raises. The idea that the most frequent word order is not necessarily the basic word order has been shown not only for sign languages but for spoken languages.

Constituent order in established sign languages is often influenced by the typology of the spoken languages surrounding them; thus, for example, ASL, like English, is head-initial, while JSL (nihonsyuwa), like Japanese, is head-final. Because of this fact, and because of the sociolinguistic environment in which sign languages occur (e.g., heavily stigmatized until recently), I cannot emphasize enough the care with which it is necessary to elicit reliable data. The worst possible way to elicit word order data is translation, as that translation can contaminate the data. This caution applies equally to

stigmatized spoken languages such as creoles. A researcher who wants to get good data needs to overcome resistance from the community in order to get good data. I will discuss some strategies for doing so.