

Acceptability judgment tasks as a measure of variation within and across languages with “flexible” constituent order

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Languages vary as to how flexible their constituents (SUBJECT, OBJECT, & VERB) are, and previously-described cases of contact-induced change in constituent order have shown that languages with flexible orders become more rigid due to contact (Heine 2008). One barrier to studying flexibility from a typological perspective is that it is difficult to operationalize degree of flexibility in a way which allows for cross-linguistic comparisons. Most languages have a canonical order in which the constituents appear. Here, I propose a cross-linguistically valid operational definition of flexibility: measuring the degree to which speakers prefer the canonical order and disprefer non-canonical orders in discourse-neutral contexts, as measured in a formal acceptability judgment experiment. I present a series of experiments demonstrating that this methodology is valid and can capture meaningful differences in flexibility, within and across languages.

The first set of experiments compares English, a rigid SVO language, Malayalam (Dravidian), and Korean, both flexible SOV languages. Participants rated the six logical variants of transitive sentences, with animate subjects and inanimate objects, on a 7-point scale. The results show that English speakers clearly prefer the canonical order, rating SVO significantly higher than all other orders. The Malayalam experiment (conducted in the field) shows that verb-position predicts acceptability for Malayalam-speakers, who only show a slight numerical preference for canonical SOV. The Korean-speakers rate SOV significantly higher than all other orders, and, like Malayalam, verb position plays a role in the non-canonical orders.

Moving to variation within languages, I present two follow-up experiments from Korean and Malayalam demonstrating within-language differences in flexibility based on language experience. Preference for canonical SOV order is significantly higher for English-dominant Korean-speakers as compared to Korean-dominant speakers, indicating reduced flexibility. Likewise, in Malayalam, younger speakers rate the canonical SOV order higher than other orders, while older speakers do not. Age correlates with language contact in this population, suggesting that language contact is negatively correlated with flexibility in constituent order. Furthermore, because low acceptability ratings are associated with processing difficulty, and older people have been found to be more sensitive to structures which are difficult to process, this pattern is the exact opposite of what we would expect if general cognitive decline was explaining the differences between age groups (Waters & Caplan 2001).

Acceptability judgment tasks are portable, can be used with audio stimuli (important when written stimuli are impossible or impractical, as in these Korean and Malayalam populations), and can capture the fine-grained distinctions between sentence types. In addition, the data presented here is evidence for a shift from flexible to rigid in a case of ongoing language contact, and it demonstrates that the flexible-rigid pattern cannot be described by wholesale borrowing of the surface word order of the contact language. Speakers who are English-proficient are not just translating English sentences into Korean and Malayalam, rather, contact with English is affecting the degree to which speakers prefer the canonical order in the flexible language. This approach can both enrich linguistic descriptions and help motivate observed typological distributions.