

Topic/subject

How to do syntactic fieldwork

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Strategy when describing a language you don't know anything about:

Lexicon



Phonology



NP-structure

- possessives
- demonstratives
- definite/indefinite ('There is a book on the table')
- adjectives



Sentence structure

- | | | |
|-------------|----------------|-----|
| - agreement | predicative, | |
| - case | transitive and | PPs |
| - tense | intransitive | |



Wh-questions

Yes/no questions

relative clauses

...

Subjects and objects

John saw Mary yesterday.

John didn't see Mary yesterday.

John is subject, *Mary* object, *yesterday* is an adverbial.

This determines the meaning.

Various ways of expressing “that meaning”

John saw MARY yesterday.
He saw Mary YESTERDAY.

It was yesterday he saw Mary.
Mary was seen by John yesterday.
MARY, he saw YESTERDAY.

Information-structural differences:

The same situation described in different ways depending on the ‘context’, including the interlocutors’ perspective on what they are talking about.

- What information-structural categories are there?
 - What distinctions are expressed by syntactic (or morphological) means?
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- How do we identify them?
 - in our own language?
 - in a language L that we don't already know, but want to describe?
-
- How do we analyze them? What is their role in the syntactic structure?

The information-structure dichotomy:

topic - given - background
comment - new - focus

Linguistic means for expressing info-structural distinctions:

- intonation
- ‘morphology’: particles, focus markers, definiteness markers, case...
- syntactic structure: passive, cleft
- word order: fronting, scrambling, ...

Working definition of ‘topic’:

The topic of a sentence S is a constituent referring to what the remainder of S is about, always accompanied by a comment, typically containing a focus element saying something informative about the topic.

Subject vs. topic

Does language L have a dedicated subject position, or does it just look like it, because the subject is typically the topic?

English:

A dog has bitten the boy.

The dog has bitten the boy.

It has bitten the boy.

Not obvious that the subject is in the same structural position in each case

1 Fixing the structural position:

A dog has bitten the boy

...if a dog **has** bitten the boy

Has a dog bitten the boy?

Between the complementizer and the auxiliary, or immediately following a fronted auxiliary.

2 Any kind of subject can occur in this position: (not just topical subjects)

...if a dog/ the dog/ any dog/ every second dog has bitten a boy

Has a dog/ the dog/ any dog/ every second dog bitten a boy?

Subject vs. topic

3. Only the subject can occur in this position: (No object can.)

*Him/the boy has bitten the dog. (or *Him/the boy has the dog bitten)

*...if him/the boy has bitten the dog.

*Has him/the boy bitten the dog.

Him the dog has bitten.

This sentence is OK, but it's not the same position.

*...if him the dog has bitten.

*Has him the dog bitten.

Subject vs. topic

Finnish:

Koira puri poikaa. (SVO)

dog-N bit boy-P

N = nominative, P = partitive, A = accusative

Koira poikaa puri. (SOV)

Poikaa koira puri. (OSV)

Poikaa puri koira. (OVS)

Puri koira poikaa. (VSO)

?Puri poikaa koira. (VOS)

1. Fixing the subject position

Koira **ei** purrut poikaa. (immediately preceding negation)

dog not bit boy

...**jos** koira **ei** purrut poikaa (immediately following complementizer)

if dog not bit boy

Puri-ko koira todellakin poikaa? (imm. following constituent with Q-particle)

bit-Q dog actually boy

'Did the dog actually bite a boy?'

Subject vs. topic

2. Any kind of subject can occur in this position: (not just topical)

...**jos** tuo koira / joku koira / mikä tahansa koira **ei** purrut poikaa
if that dog / some dog / what ever dog not bit boy

Puri-ko tuo koira / joku koira / mikä tahansa koira poikaa?
bit-Q that dog / some dog / what ever dog boy

This implies that there is a dedicated subject position.

3. But: Not only the subject can occur in this position:

Poikaa puri koira. (OVS)

boy-P bit dog-N

'The boy was bitten by a dog' / 'A dog bit the boy.'

...**jos** poikaa **ei** purrut koira.

if boy-P not bit dog-N

Puri-ko poikaa todellakin koira?

bit-Q boy-P actually dog-N

So the Finnish 'initial position' is a mixed position:

Subject position, when the subject is initial,

Topic position when the subject is not initial.

*Monta poikaa puri koira.

many boys-P bit dog-N

Intended meaning: 'Many boys were bitten by a dog.'

What about Udmurt?

Vilkuna 1998: Sentential word order in Udmurt and Finnish

Udmurt		Finnish	
S V O	9.1%	S V O	78.2%
S O V	53.8%	S O V	1.8%
O S V	20.5%	O S V	5.0%
O V S	13.1%	O V S	13.7%
V S O	2.5%	V S O	1.3%
V O S	1.0%	V O S	0.0%

O = complement of V (not just direct object)

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Generalizations for Udmurt (Vilkuna 1998):

- Nominative objects strongly tend to immediately precede the verb (88%).
- Non-nominative objects also tend to precede V (85%) but half the time not immediately precede.
- Wh-phrases tend to immediately precede V.

The questions

What is the structure of each of the sequences of V, S, and O in Udmurt?

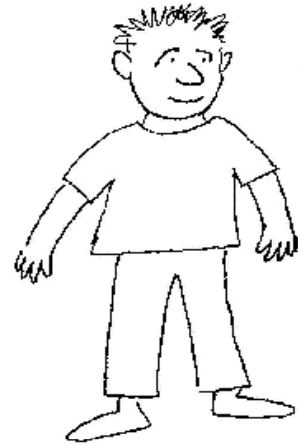
More specifically: What is the position of the initial S in SOV and SVO,
and initial O in OSV and OVS?

Start by eliciting unmarked order.
Then elicit marked orders.

Describe what is happening in the following pictures:









The strategy:

1. Identify diagnostic properties of the S-position in SOV,
2. Check if all varieties of S can occur in that position:
 - definites
 - definite pronouns
 - indefinites
 - quantified NPs, indefinite pronouns
3. Check if O in OSV can occur in that position.
4. If it can, what kind of O?

- Identify diagnostic properties of the S-position in SOV

Complementizers?

Nina [mon ts'oryg s'iis'ko **šuy**sa] malpaz
 Nina I fish eat.3SG COMP think

Nina [kolym naleš **gyn**], (myj) (tudym) kočkam. (Mari)
 Nina fish-A get.3SG if I it-A eat
 'If Nina gets fish, I will eat it.'

Translate:

Nina thinks that a dog bit a boy. Nina [SOV that] thinks

If the dog bit a boy, we will kill it. SOV if , ...

(Here is a boy)

Nina thinks that a dog bit him. Nina [OSV that] thinks

If a dog bit the boy, he needs treatment. OSV if , ...

Describe a picture of a dog biting a boy/ a man pushing a car/ etc.
“What’s happening here?”

Context 1: Did the dog bite a GIRL? No, ____

Context 2: Did a WOLF bite the boy? No, __

Context 3: The dog didn’t just bark at the boy. It ____

Context 4: “The dog didn’t bite the boy.”

“Yes it did.”