Introduction to Features of OV Languages

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0. Introduction

Dryer (1997) classifies languages into types on the basis of two factors: whether or not the object (O) follows the verb (V) (VO versus OV) and whether or not the subject (S) commonly follows the verb (VS versus SV). Most languages belong to one of three types: VS/VO, SV/VO (SVO) or SV/OV (SOV).

Because of time constraints, this paper concentrates on just two features that are particularly relevant to OV languages: (1) The Principle of Natural Information Flow and (2) problems faced by translators into SOV languages when strengthening material follows a THESIS in the source languages.

1. The Principle of Natural Information Flow

If you work with an SOV language, you will be aware that, every now and then, the subject will come after the object, or the object and adjunct will change places. The principle that underlies most of these deviations from what we think of as the default order of constituents is often called the ‘Principle of Natural Information Flow’ (Comrie 1989; see Firbas 1964). When a clause conforms to this principle, then the non-verbal constituents that convey established information are placed before those that convey new or non-established information.

So, when the subject is non-established information and other constituents convey more established information, then the subject is placed immediately before the verb. This is illustrated by the following sentence from a text in Azerbaijani.

(1) established (O) less established (S) non-established verb

Söhbətin bu yerində / məni gülmək tutdu.

conversation.of place.3s.LOC 1s.ACC laugh.INF catch.PAST

‘At this point in the conversation laughter overcame me.’ (Joke 40)

The immediate context for the above sentence is a reported conversation between two participants other than the storyteller, so the first constituent (‘at this point in the conversation’) conveys established information. The storyteller is present (sentence 29 refers to ‘we’), so is also an established referent, albeit less active up to this point than the participants in the conversation. In contrast, there has been no previous reference to ‘laughter’, so this constituent conveys non-

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1 The typological observations of this paper are most accurate when the languages of a region are of the same type. Skewing is likely to occur when there is prolonged and extensive contact between languages of different types.

2 I discuss connectives in the Translation 4 session on Gojri (Indo-Aryan).

3 Many VS/VO and SVO languages also tend to order non-verbal constituents according to the Principle of Natural Information Flow. See sec. 3.1 of Levinsohn 2006a for examples in Koiné Greek (a VS/VO language).

4 See Kirk 2002 for the ‘Joke’ text from which some of the Azerbaijani examples of this section have been taken. Sung Hun Kim kindly provided the ‘Strange Incident’ text from which other examples have been taken.

The following abbreviations have been used in the glossing of the examples: ABL ablative; ACC accusative; ADD additive; COMP complementiser; DAT dative; DEM demonstrative; GCNJ gerund: conjunctive; GEN genitive; INF infinitive; LOC locative; NEG negative; PF perfect (?); PRES present; REL relativiser; 1p, 3p: 1st, 3rd person plural; 1s, 3s 1st, 3rd person singular.
established information. The order of constituents therefore conforms to the Principle of Natural Information Flow.

The Principle of Natural Information Flow also explains why an object (O) sometimes precedes an adjunct (Adj), and sometimes follows it. Compare the following Azerbaijani examples.

(2) established (O) established (Adj) less established verbs

Ana balalarını başıña toplayıb sakit-oldu.

‘The mother (hen) gathered her chicks under her wing and settled down.’ (Strange Incident 21)

(3) (Adj) more established (O) less established verbs

(Xoş-beş on beşdən sonra) böyüküzdəki stulu çəkib əyləşdi

‘(After the greetings), he drew up a chair beside us and sat down.’ (Joke 23a)

In (2), the object precedes the dative adjunct (an order we tend to think of as default). In (3), in contrast, the object follows the locative adjunct. Once again, the determining factor is the Principle of Natural Information Flow. In (2), both the mother hen and her chicks had featured in the previous sentence (‘Some of the little chicks … ran to their mother’s side’), whereas the place where she would gather them had not previously been mentioned. In the context of (3), ‘we’ are active participants, so ‘beside us’ refers to information that is more established than ‘a chair’, which had not previously been mentioned. The order of constituents in both sentences therefore conform to the Principle of Natural Information Flow.

When more than one piece of non-established information occurs in the same clause, Firbas (1964) observed that, to the extent that the syntax of the language permits, the most important piece of information comes last. Consider (4):

(4) (Time) (Adj) (O) (Adj) (O) verbs

O gün də dəhlizdə kiminsə başıña bir qapaz salıb, deyirlər.

‘The other day, in the corridor, he cuffed someone on the head, they say.’ (Joke 39)

Most of the information in the above sentence is non-established. If Firbas is right, then the most important piece of new information will be ‘lay a cuff’, rather than where the cuff landed. Certainly, the place where the incident took place (in the corridor) and the vague ‘someone’ are less important than the fact that the person was cuffed on the head.

Violations of the Principle of Natural Information Flow. Under certain circumstances, most languages can violate the Principle of Natural Information Flow (i.e., place non-established information before established information). Such violations most commonly involve identificational propositions with ‘narrow focus’ (van Valin 2005:71). They begin with the focal constituent and follow it with the established or presupposed information.

Two propositions with narrow focus occur in extract (5) below. The context is that a kite had snatched a black chick nicknamed Blackbaby from the author’s yard and had taken it to its own nest, where she was feeding it along with her own chicks.

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5 Lambrecht (1994: 222) uses the term ‘argument focus’. For further discussion of terms such as ‘identificational’, ‘argument focus’, ‘topic – comment’ and ‘predicate focus’, please attend Nick Lunn’s Introduction to Information Structure (Thursday 17th October, 1630).
In (5a), ‘the predatory bird didn’t eat Blackbaby’ is established information, and the focus (non-established information) is on why this happened. Similarly, in (5c), ‘Blackbaby had stayed safe’ is established information, whereas ‘because of kite’s maternal care’ is non-established information, deduced from the supposition of (5b) that the kite must have treated Blackbaby as its own chick. The order of constituents in both (5a) and (5c) therefore violates the Principle of Natural Information Flow.

In VS/VO languages, the Principle of Natural Information Flow may also be violated in topic-comment propositions with ‘predicate focus’, in order to give prominence to a focal constituent. The following are examples from Koiné Greek.

(6) non-established established verb
πιστ/uni1F78ς    /uni1F41 θεός
faithful    the God
‘God is faithful’ (1 Cor. 1:9a—verbless)

(7) non-established established verb
µωρία    α/uni1F50τ/uni1FF7   /uni1F10στιν
foolishness   to him  they are
‘They are foolishness to him’ (1 Cor. 2:14b)

Application to translation. The Principle of Natural Information Flow operates in many languages, but translators often fail to follow it. For example, they tend to reproduce the order of constituents in the source language even when this results in a violation of the Principle of Natural Information Flow (see further below).

In English, for instance, the adjunct normally follows the object, so the RSV translation of 1 Thess. 4:6a reads, ‘that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter’. Notice, though, that ‘in this matter’ is established information, whereas no previous reference has been made to ‘his brother’.

Natural texts in both OV and VO target languages represented in ‘Discourse for Translation’ workshops over the last few years have typically deviated from default constituent order in order to place non-established information after established information. Nevertheless, translators of 1 Thess. 4:6a invariably place the object before the adjunct in the draft they bring to the workshop.

6 The order of constituents in the Greek of 1 Thess. 4:6a conforms to the Principle of Natural Information Flow:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>verbs</th>
<th>established</th>
<th>non-established</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>τό µή ὑπερβαίνειν</td>
<td>καὶ πλεονεκτεῖν</td>
<td>ἐν τῷ πράγματι</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the not to overstep</td>
<td>and to wrong</td>
<td>in the matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ</td>
<td></td>
<td>the brother his</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, as soon as a consultant prompts them to change the order, they agree that it sounds better that way!!

Not only will it sound better in most OV languages if translated topic-comment propositions conform to the Principle of Natural Information Flow. Violating the Principle in an OV language may well imply that the proposition is identificational. For example, drafts of 1 Thess. 4:6a that place ‘his brother’ before ‘in the matter’ could be understood to imply that, whereas one must not wrong one’s brother in the matter, one can still wrong a non-Christian in the matter. In other words, violating the Principle of Natural Information Flow when translating 1 Thess. 4:6a into an OV language has the effect of identifying who it is that one is not to wrong!

I state in Levinsohn 2006b, ‘To check some discourse features, a word-by-word back-translation is generally necessary’. Such a check will immediately reveal whether the order of constituents conforms to or violates the Principle of Natural Information Flow. If the principle has been violated, then the consultant should check whether the proposition concerned was identificational in the original. If not, then it might well be appropriate to suggest that the constituents be reordered to conform to the principle.

Discussion

1. Do the majority of propositions in the languages for which you are a consultant conform to the Principle of Natural Information Flow?
2. Under what circumstances is the Principle of Natural Information Flow violated in these languages (e.g., only in identificational propositions)?

2. Strengthening Material in SOV Languages

The second part of this presentation concerns problems faced by translators into SOV languages when strengthening material follows a THESIS in the source languages. It is very common in the source languages for a THESIS such as You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God (Ex. 20:7) to be followed by material introduced by kî (Hebrew) or γάρ (Koiné Greek) that strengthens the THESIS in some way. For example:

7a hort. thesis You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
7b strengthening For [kî] the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

Handling material introduced in the source languages by a strengthening conjunction is a particular challenge in SOV languages and one that we are only beginning to come to terms with. I am hoping that you had time to look at the pre-reading of this topic (Levinsohn 2006c, 2008), so that I only need to touch on the possible ways of handling the problem. I will use Ex. 20:4-7 to illustrate each of the possible strategies.

Strategy 1. Often, in a SOV language, there is no simple conjunction that naturally translates ‘for’, so translators may be tempted to borrow a ‘because’-type conjunction from the language of wider communication or introduce strengthening material with an expression such as ‘the reason’. For example:

7a hort. thesis You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
7b strengthening The reason: the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

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7 The interpretive use marker ὅτι is also used to introduce strengthening material in Koiné Greek.
However, analysis of natural texts usually reveals that ‘the reason’ is only used when the strengthening material is more important than the THESIS (see Levinsohn 1999).

**Strategy 2.** When a hortatory THESIS is followed by strengthening material in natural texts, **juxtaposition** of the strengthening material is the norm. So, in the following version, no connective introduces 5b and 7b:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5a HORT. THESIS</th>
<th>You shall not bow down to them.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5b-6 strengthening</td>
<td>I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7a HORT. THESIS</td>
<td>You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7b strengthening</td>
<td>The LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, such juxtaposition has its dangers, too, as it is very common in SOV languages for strengthening material to **precede** the hortatory THESIS to which it relates. In other words, Ex. 20:5b-6 may be understood as supporting 7a, rather than 5a:  

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7a HORT. THESIS</td>
<td>You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7b strengthening</td>
<td>[implied So] You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The association of strengthening material with the wrong hortatory thesis may even be made explicit, as has happened in at least one passage in one version of the Korean Bible. The exhortations of Phil. 2:12 and 14 are separated by material that supports 13:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>12 HORT. THESIS</th>
<th>Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 strengthening</td>
<td>for [.Unity] it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 HORT. THESIS</td>
<td>Do all things without murmuring and arguing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the Korean version, though, 13 supports 14:

<table>
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<th>… work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.</th>
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<tr>
<td>13 strengthening</td>
<td>It is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 HORT. THESIS</td>
<td>So do all things without murmuring and arguing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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8 I mentioned this danger during a workshop in India. After the lecture, a translator who was a native speaker of Tamil (Dravidian) came up to me and told me that he had always taken Ex. 20:5b-6 as interpreting 7a, rather than 5a!
Strategy 3. When the THESIS and the strengthening material are in the same verse, it is usually acceptable sociolinguistically to reverse their order (something we frequently did in the Inga New Testament). So Ex. 20:7 might become:

7b strengthening  
*The LORD your God will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.*

7a HORT. THESIS  
*[So]* You shall not misuse his name.

Nevertheless, there is a danger in this strategy, too. Changing the order of propositions from deductive style (in which the strengthening material follows the hortatory THESIS) to inductive style (in which it precedes the THESIS) also changes the nature of the exhortation from instruction to persuasion (see Levinsohn 2006c sec. 4). Such a change might therefore result in the Ten Commandments (instruction) being interpreted as the Ten Pieces of Good Advice!

Examination of natural texts in SOV languages reveals two further options.

Strategy 4. Most material that supports a hortatory THESIS in natural text is encoded as a consequence of obeying or not obeying the exhortation. So, a natural rendering of Ex. 20:7 in a SOV language might be:

7a HORT. THESIS  
*You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.*

7b consequence  
*If anyone misuses his name, the LORD will not hold that person guiltless.*

Strategy 5. When a hortatory THESIS in a natural text in an SOV language is followed by strengthening material other than consequences, the THESIS is almost always repeated after the strengthening material, thus forming an inclusio (see sec. 4 of Levinsohn 2006c for an example). Some passages of Scripture can be adapted in sociolinguistically acceptable ways to achieve the same effect. For instance, Ex. 20:4-6 lend themselves to conversion into an inclusio because 4-5a contain more than one exhortation. All that is needed is for one of them to be placed before the strengthening material of 5b and the other after it:

4 HORT. THESIS  
*You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.*

5b strengthening  
*I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me,*

5a HORT. THESIS  
*but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

*So you shall not bow down to them.*

About half of the languages of the world are thought to be SOV (see Tomlin 1986:22), and my impression is that the majority of languages that still lack the Scriptures are of this type. In spite of this fact, translation helps seldom if ever address the problems that arise when translating into them source texts in a VS/VO language.

Discussion

1. When strengthening material follows a THESIS in the source languages, which strategy or strategies have your translation teams followed? What problems or successes have you experienced?

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9 In an older Korean translation, Ex. 20:7b is translated as a consequence of the exhortation of 7a.

10 In my notes on information structure and discourse features in certain New Testament epistles, I have started including comments such as the following on 1 Thess. 4:6b:

“**Translation suggestion for OV languages.** Turn this reason into a consequence of not obeying the exhortations of 3b-6a. For example, ‘We have already told you and warned you that, if you do wrong like these ways, the Lord will punish you’.”
References


