

Word Order Variants and Ellipsis of Subjects and Objects in English, Evenki, Chukchee and
Russian folklore narrative texts (quantitative approach)
(Oral / poster)

Quantitative Linguistic Typology

It was known decades ago that word order (WO) in Russian and Chukchee declarative sentences is more or less free, whereas in English and Evenki it is more or less fixed. Less is known about the possibility of omitting the main nominal parts of the sentence (subjects and direct objects) in the above mentioned languages although English as a non-pronoun-drop-language is opposed to all other three languages under consideration.

Only quantitative analysis of vast text samples can help define (1) the degree of flexibility vs. rigidity of WOs, and (2) the ratio of elliptic constructions in folklore texts of the languages in question. The data for the quantitative analysis included text samples comprising 1700 English transitive and intransitive finite verb forms (FVF), about 1000 Evenki FVFs, about 1870 Russian FVFs and about 2500 Chukchee FVFs (the source texts are given in the references). Only narrative fragments of the source texts were taken into consideration which means that questions and imperatives were excluded from the analysis. Since only constructions with V_{fin} (VF) were calculated, participial and converbal forms and constructions were also disregarded.

There are eight theoretically possible WO variants of non-elliptic (NE) constructions – two with intransitive verbs (SV and VS) and six with transitive verbs; plus five theoretically possible elliptic (EL) constructions (omitted elements are put in brackets) – SV(O) / VS (O); (S)OV / (S)VO and (SO)V. All these types are discussed in detail in the presentation.

The quantitative analysis of these types gave the following results (the poster will include the full table of variant frequencies):

1. The ratio of NE vs. EL constructions in four samples: English -- 82 % (NE) – 18 % (EL); Evenki – 46.2 % (NE) – 53.8 % (EL); Chukchee – 33.2 % (NE) – 66.8 % (EL); Russian – 44.2 % (NE) – 55.8 % (EL).
2. The ratio of WO variants in NE constructions with V_{in}(transitive): English: SV (41.5 %) – VS (10.5 %); Evenki: SV (31.5 %) – VS (2.3 %); Chukchee: SV (18.2 %) – VS (7.3 %); Russian: SV (16.4 %) – VS (15 %).
3. The ratio of WO variants in NE constructions with V_{transitive}: English: SVO (29 %) – SOV (0 %: 1 % goes to OSV of the famous type ‘Talent he had, money he hadn’t’); Evenki: SVO (3 %) – SOV (9 %); Chukchee: SVO (2.7 %) – SOV (2.56 %); Russian: SVO (5.8 %) – SOV (3.6 %).
4. The ratio of WO variants in EL constructions with V_{transitive} (O is omitted): English: SV (3.23 %) – VS (0.12 %); Evenki: SV (6.1 %) – VS (0 %); Chukchee: SV (11 %) – VS (1.9 %); Russian: SV (4.24 %) – VS (1 %).

The most interesting is the frequency of V-only constructions (with both S and O omitted; the percentage is given in the diminishing order): Chukchee (12.2 %) > Russian (10.36 %) > Evenki (9.5 %) > English (1.73 %). It should be noted that Chukchee is the only language of our sample that has subject-object agreement on the finite verb form.

The data presented above clearly shows that quantitative method helps to get precise information pertaining to such language properties as WO characteristics and ellipsis possibilities.

References

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