Jockeying for position: Competing motivations in Garrwa word order.
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This paper examines competition between syntax and pragmatics in determining word order in actual language use. Speakers of all languages face the challenge of tailoring their utterances to meet the informational and interactive needs of the local context, while working within linguistic structures that may no longer be sensitive to these needs. While the focus here is on one particular North Australian language, Garrwa, the results have implications for our general understanding of where syntax and pragmatics meet, and the nature of 'free' word order more generally.

My analysis is based on the word order restrictions, preferences and practices using a corpus of Garrwa discourse. While Garrwa has been described as basically verb-initial in its typology (eg. Mushin 2005), there are many discourse contexts in which verbs are not initial, and some contexts in which they are cannot be initial. Second position is more restricted: only pronouns and associated clitics are found there (Mushin 2006). The placement of referential nominals and adjuncts are not obviously syntactically governed but is motivated by both the information status (eg. as new or prominent), and by the presence or absence of more syntactically constrained constituents (eg. second position pronouns or initial-only elements like question words or contrastive markers). For example, in (a), the verb is initial and the object nominal immediately follows the second position pronoun. In (b), the presence of an initial-only question word results in an order where the verb occurs immediately following the 2P pronoun, followed by the object nominal.

(a)   *langandaba   ja=ngayu   ngaki diraji*
        hang.up   FUT=1sgNOM   1sgDAT dress
        I'm going to hang up my dress. (8.8.03.2.TD)

(b)   *wanyi-nkanyi yalunjalu   ninkijba   kukurdun   wawarran   junu*
        what-DAT   3plACC/3plNOM   look.at   black   child   DUBIT
        Why do they want to look at those black kids, I don't know. (20.6.08.KS)

In these and other examples I detail where and how the syntacticised constructions of Garrwa grammar compete with the pragmatic motivations to put prominent information first. I show that while it is not always the case that the more syntacticised structure has priority, speakers have systematic ways of managing such priorities.

This paper thus goes beyond previous work on the 'front end' of Garrwa sentences and utterances (cf. Simpson & Mushin 2008) to show how ordering patterns over the whole sentence are motivated by competition between what is already in-built grammatical architecture (ie. syntacticized) and what is open to locally managed speaker choices, determined by context (ie. pragmatics). If both are taken into account, the word order of Garrwa appears remarkably systematic. Australian languages have often been described as having 'free' or 'pragmatic' word order, where the positioning of words is claimed to be motivated by extra-syntactic factors and not by the syntactic function of constituents (eg. Hale 1992). But the precise nature of this syntactic freedom is regularly left unexplored in descriptive grammars of Australian languages (although there are some specific studies of word order and syntactic structure - eg Swartz 1989, McConvell 1996, Laughren 2002, Simpson & Mushin 2008). This paper therefore also contributes to our understanding of what 'free word order' means in the Australian context and more broadly.

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