
Pre- and postverbal complement clauses: A simple ordering alternative?

The present paper examines the cross-linguistic properties of (object) complement clauses from the perspective of constituent-order typology. In contrast to relative clauses (e.g. Lehmann 1984, Dryer 2011), the position of complement clauses vis-à-vis their associated head element (here: the matrix verb) has not yet been considered sufficiently in the typological literature. Previous studies are based on limited or non-controlled samples (e.g. Dryer 1980, Ogihara 2009); they stop short of providing a comprehensive description of the positional patterns; and importantly, they do not investigate the extent to which clause order interacts with other morphosyntactic and functional properties of the complement clause. Conversely, studies that *are* concerned with the structure and semantics of complementation (e.g. Cristofaro 2003, among many others) do not typically make reference to the order of complement and matrix clause, suggesting that this parameter is extraneous to the coding of complement relations.

In this paper, by contrast, we argue that the position of the complement clause significantly affects its morphosyntactic structure, and that it can do so independently of semantic considerations. To begin with, a balanced sample of 102 languages firmly establishes an overall asymmetry in the position of complement clauses to the right of the matrix verb: Over 50% of the languages examined have *exclusively* postverbal complements, regardless of the number of complementation patterns distinguished. Exclusively preverbal-complement languages are found much less often (28%), as are languages with mixed or flexible ordering patterns (20%). As with recessive ordering patterns in general (cf. Greenberg 1966), the occurrence of preverbal complement clauses is typically contingent on harmonic alignment with other prevalent orders, especially with preverbal object NPs. Crucially, however, across both OV and VO languages, it also correlates with structural choices: In particular, preverbal complement clauses are conspicuously more prone to the reduction of clausal morphosyntactic properties (verb form, TAM choices, argument realisation) and are marked as subordinate units in very different ways from postverbal complements. All of these properties mirror the findings for relative clauses, and thus appear to be indicative of a more general pattern of left-branching constituents.

In complementation, however, it is also well-known that the structure of the complement clause interacts with the semantics of the matrix verb (Givón 1980, 2001): Certain predicate classes, notably phasal and desiderative verbs, are much less likely to be accompanied by full clauses than others, such as utterance or propositional-attitude verbs. This, too, is reflected in our data, and the combination of the above findings could thus plausibly suggest that the semantics of the matrix verb also interacts with positional choices: one would expect, for instance, that utterance complements are much more often postverbal than complements of other predicate classes. However, we show that this expectation is not borne out: There are no clear-cut implicational associations between semantics and position that would match the corresponding structural ones, and there are no significant differences in position between the predicate classes that are structurally most distinct from one another. By contrast, all predicate classes in our database show an increase in morphosyntactic reduction when they are coded by preverbal complements. This suggests that pre- and postverbal complement clauses are probabilistically associated with different grammatical structures, independently (to a large degree) of semantic considerations. We conclude that this intimate relation between linearization and syntactic structure needs to be recognised properly in the typological study of clause order, as it has important consequences for the discussion of constituent-order universals in general.

References

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