

Incorporated subject pronouns in word order typology

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Word order has been described from various perspectives. In 1963, Greenberg posited the six languages types SVO, SOV, VSO, VOS, OVS, and OSV. Dryer (1997) recently modified this classification and argued that a more adequate classification would be OV vs. VO and SV vs. VS, which yields a four-way distinction of VS/VO, SV/OV, SV/OV, VS/OV. Alternative approaches show that the basic constituent order in languages lead to a completely different pattern if language use or discourse patterns are considered (Du Bois 1987, and Payne 1997). Others make a distinction between languages whose word order is determined by grammatical relations vs. languages that are pragmatically motivated (Mithun 1987).

Little attention has been paid to the fact that one of the most important factors for determining the word order in many African languages is that the subject as a core argument is incorporated in the verb.

Jelinek has called these languages pronominal argument languages (1984). The generative tradition has referred to them as pro-drop languages or as the Null-Subject Parameter, whereas Van Valin classified them as head marking and free word order languages (2004). The author has demonstrated that the incorporated subject parameter (among others) in the verb-initial language Toposa has led to an ergative discourse word order VS/VO (Schröder 2008). She has also argued for a re-analysis of the so called subject argument in languages that have incorporated subjects and has rejected the agreement analysis for such languages (Schröder 2004).

This paper wants to show that the word order in languages that have incorporated subjects (and in some cases even objects) is pragmatically motivated and is best interpreted in terms of information structure, using the concepts of topic and focus according to Lambrecht (1994). The overt subject argument in transitive clauses often has the pragmatic role of topic, while the overt subject argument in VS sentences is used for the introduction of new participants or new information, it thus takes the role of focus.

Evidence will be given from two verb-initial languages: Tugen, a Southern Nilotic language, and Toposa, an Eastern Nilotic language, as well as from two Bantu languages (Kiswahili and Gikuyu), which are usually described SVO. The paper will draw its data from narrative, procedural and expository texts.