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e-mail: mjgrandorbit@yahoo.com, mekuri01@yahoo.com
phone: 080333589169, 08056056045, 08033410255, 08052709998

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52. Diagnostics for Distinguishing between SVO & SOV Languages: Evidence from English & Bàtɔ̀nū*

Issa O. Sanusi

Dept. of Linguistics & Nigerian Languages, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.
e-mail: sanusissa2@yahoo.com

For most languages of the world with fixed word order, the concept of word order still remains one of the unique linguistic features with which such languages are classified into different types. In other words, the concept is considered by linguists to be one of the linguistic universals (Greenberg (1966, 1968), Bach (1974), Blake (1994), Carnie (2002), etc.). Given Blake's (1994) proposed syntactic diagnostics for distinguishing between SVO and SOV languages, this paper considers English and Bàtɔ̀nū as 'mirror images' in their manifestation of the diagnostics. Thus, empirical data are provided from the two languages to show and describe the manifestation of the typological characteristics that make them structurally opposite. The paper also highlights some pedagogical implications of the contrast between the two languages for Bàtɔ̀nū native speakers learning English as a second language. The theoretical framework adopted for our analysis in this work is the 'Principles and Parameters' theory initiated by Chomsky (1981) and developed in other subsequent relevant works.

1. Introduction

The dominant surface order of grammatical constituents in a simple declarative sentence, with no special focus or topicalization features, is referred to in the linguistic literature as the 'basic word order' in a given language. A great deal of attention has been paid to the way in which languages vary the order of those grammatical constituents in a sentence, as part of typological studies. Thus, word order is considered to be a more satisfactory way of classifying languages than the older morphological method (which recognized such types as isolating and inflecting) into which many languages do not fit neatly (see Crystal (1997:8)).

In comparing word orders across languages, it is important to note that what is being compared is the 'basic' or 'favourite' pattern (i.e.; the natural, usual, unmarked order) found in each language. This sequential arrangement of words in a simple declarative sentence is considered by linguists to be one of the linguistic universals. For instance, Greenberg (1968:138) describes synchronic linguistic universals as the types of linguistic statement that can be made that will hold true for all languages, when we compare the results of synchronic descriptions. It is on this note that this paper presents empirical evidence from English (an SVO language) and Bàtɔ̀nū (an SOV language) to validate Blake's (1994:99-100) proposed syntactic diagnostics outlined in (1) below. Unlike free word order languages like Latin, the basic word orders in these two languages are relatively fixed.

Our choice of English for comparison with Bàtɔ̀nū is not only because English is an SVO language, but because of its status as an official language that is required to be acquired by every Nigerian child; and also because of its

communicative function in Nigeria as a lingua franca that is spoken in every part of the country.

Given the current thinking in Universal Grammar (UG) and the issue of 'learnability', it is assumed that the structural differences between English and Bātōnū, as 'mirror images', will generate some pedagogical implications for Bātōnū native speakers learning English as a second language.

1.1 Introducing the Bātōnū Language

Bātōnū is popularly known among the non-native speakers as "Bàribá" or "Bàrùbá". It is genetically classified as a language of the Gur (Voltaic) subgroup of the Niger-Congo family (Welmers (1952:82), Comrie (1987: 965) and Sanusi (2001)). Bātōnū is a noun class language with seven prominent noun classes¹. Unlike Kiswahili and other Bantu languages, the language uses suffix noun class markers rather than prefix markers. The noun class markers (CM) in the language include -wí, -té, -mē, -ní, -yé, -gé and -sí (see Sanusi (2001) and 2002)).

The language is spoken as a first language or mother-tongue in two adjacent countries in West Africa – Nigeria and the Republic of Benin. The major areas in which Bātōnū is spoken in Nigeria include Kosubosu, Okuta, Gwanara, Yashikira, Ilesha, Chikanda, all in the Baruten Local Government Area of Kwara State. The Bātōnū-speaking areas in the Republic of Benin include Parakou, Nikki, Kandi, Natitingou, etc. The Nikki dialect of Bātōnū², which is considered to be the standard form of the language, is used for our analysis in this paper.

On the other hand, English language, being the language with which Bātōnū is compared in this paper, needs no general introduction. It is an internationally recognized language with sufficient literature.

2. Language Universals and Typological Classification

While considering the relationship between typological classification of languages and language universals, Malmkjaer (2002:321-2) makes the following remarks:

Some language universals are features present in all or an overwhelming majority of languages. Other universals are implicational: they state that if feature x is present in a language, then (it is highly likely that) feature y will also be present in that language.

For instance, languages are typologized on the basis of the order in which Subject (S), Object (O), and Verb (V) typically occur in the simple sentence of the language. This is normally referred to as 'Word Order' typology. While discussing the most common basic word orders among the languages of the world, Crystal (1997: 98) makes the following observation:

Apart from cases of free word order (e.g. Latin, Quechua, Navajo, Fore), there are six logical possibilities: SVO, SOV, VSO, VOS, OSV, OVS. Of these, over 75% of the world's languages use SVO (as in English, French, Hausa, Vietnamese) or SOV (as in Japanese, Amharic, Tibetan, Korean).

Greenberg (1966:76) however added the empirical fact that only the first three word orders (i.e., SVO, SOV and VSO) are commonly found among human languages.

It is now commonly accepted that parametric differences between languages are of immense linguistic benefit in defining dimensions along which languages differ (see van Kemenade and Vincent (1997:3). For instance, there is a correlation between the position of the adposition (i.e. whether a language has preposition or postposition) and the order verb-object (VO) or object-verb (OV). In other words, it is claimed that a language with SVO word order like English will attest prepositions, thereby exhibiting prepositional phrases; while a language with SOV word order like Bātōnū will attest postpositions, thereby exhibiting postpositional phrases. It was on the basis of this correlation between word-order typology and linguistic universals that Blake (1994: 99) postulated a set of syntactic diagnostics for distinguishing between SVO and SOV languages. The set of diagnostics is listed in (1) below.

- | | | | |
|-----|--------------|---|--------------|
| (1) | SVO | : | SOV |
| (a) | Verb-initial | | Verb-final |
| (b) | Preposition | | Postposition |

While making a general comment about the correlation between language universals and typological classification, as shown in (1) above, Blake (1994: 99) states that:

Since the verb is the head of the clause and the adposition the head of the adpositional phrase, this would mean an association of prepositions with verb-initial languages and of postpositions with verb-final languages. Whatever the reason, there is such an association plus a strong association of prepositions with subject-verb-object (SVO) order as in English.

2.1 Word Order and Parameter-Setting

As implied in the above quotation from Blake (1994: 99), the contrast between SVO word order languages (like English) and SOV languages (like Bātōnū) is parameterized under the concept of **headedness**, which is popularly referred to in 'Principles and Parameters' theory as 'head parameter'. Thus, by comparing English and Bātōnū, using the diagnostics in (1) above, the value of the Head Parameter in English is 'head first' or 'head-initial', while the value of the parameter in Bātōnū is 'head last' or 'head-final'. In other words, in English, each lexical head precedes its complement while in Bātōnū, each lexical head follows its complement. Therefore, both English and Bātōnū are syntactically considered as 'mirror images' in this respect. The data presented in (2), (3), (4) and (5) below illustrate the contrast between the two languages.

2.2 Verb Phrases in English

In English declarative sentences, main verbs occur immediately after the subject NPs and precede the object NPs in transitive sentences. For example, a verb phrase

(VP) consists of a verb, as the head of the phrase, plus the complement as shown within the brackets, in each of the sentences given in (2) below:

- (2) (i) The man [_{vp}likes his wife.]
 (ii) He [_{vp}opened the door.]
 (iii) John [_{vp}travelled to Abuja.]
 (iv) She [_{vp}bought a book for her husband.]
 (v) I [_{vp}described the building.]

2.3 Prepositional Phrases in English

As earlier mentioned in (2.0) above, one of the typological characteristics of SVO languages is that they prefer prepositions to postpositions. Thus, being an SVO language, English exhibits prepositional phrases in its clause structure, as shown within the brackets in each of the examples given in (3) below:

- (3) i. He jumped [_{pp}over the wall.]
 ii. Plants often grow [_{pp}near the banks of rivers.]
 iii. She swept the dust [_{pp}under the carpet.]
 iv. The house was built [_{pp}on the mountain.]
 v. I went [_{pp}to the school.]

2.4 Verb Phrases in Bātōnū.

Unlike English, Bātōnū exhibits SOV word order. Consequently, main verbs always occur at the sentence-final position in declarative sentences in the language. Thus, in transitive sentences, direct-object NPs occur immediately after the subject NPs, and such object NPs always precede their main verbs, as exemplified in (4) below.

- (4) i. Wòrú; ū_i [_{vp}ním – mɛ nɔr-ā.]
 Woru he water CM drink PAST
 Agr-S
 'Wòrú drank water'.
 ii. ú [dī ā – ní dī.]
 3sg. food CM eat
 'He ate the food'.
 iii. ná [_{vp}dèmúnù-yé kɛɛrī – mɔ.]
 1sg. orange CM peel PROG

- iv. nem bǎǎ_i – wí ū_i [v_ptíré – rú dwū – ā.]
 my father CM he book Det. Buy PAST
 'My father bought a book'.
- v. Alimotu_i ū_i [v_pwéké – té kɔr – ā.]
 Alimotu she pot CM break PAST
 Agr-S
 'Alimotu broke the pot'.

2.5 Postpositional Phrases in Bātɔnū

Greenberg (1966), Blake (1994: 99) and Trask (1993: 212) observed that languages with SOV word order, such as Japanese and Basque, prefer postpositions rather than prepositions. Thus, Bātɔnū, unlike English, exhibits postpositional phrases in its clause structure as exemplified in (5) below:

- (5) i. Wòrú_i ū_i sín – ā [pp kità – té wɔɔ.]
 Woru he sit PAST chair CM on
 Agr-S
 'Wòrú sat on the chair'.
- ii. bì_i – wí u_i dīā – ní dī [pp diì – té min.]
 child CM he food CM eat room CM inside
 Agr-S
 'The child ate the food inside the room'.
- iii. nem bǎǎ_i – wí ū_i wín góbí – yé bèrūw – à [pp nem bɔɔ – té sɔ.]
 my father CM he his money CM keep PAST my bag CM in
 'My father kept his money in my bag'.
- iv. ná nùú dèmúnù – yé nàsáá [pp gbèè – té ndi.]
 1sg him orange CM bring farm CM from
 'I brought him some oranges from the farm'.
- v. Báké_i ū_i gbèré – ní yíkù – à [pp gbàbù – té sɔ.]
 Bake she maize CM cook PAST kitchen CM in
 Agr-S
 'Bake cooked the maize in the kitchen'.

2.6 Fixing a Value for the Head Parameter in English and Bātɔnū

The order of head and complement is one of the parameters of UG. Therefore, Head Parameter involves fixing a value for the heads of phrases in a given language. In English, as shown in (2) and (3) above, the value of the parameter is "head first", where each lexical head precedes its complement. On the other hand, in Bātɔnū, the value of the parameter is "head last", where each lexical head follows its complement, as exemplified in (4) and (5) above.

Based on X-bar theory (a sub-theory of GB theory), we can use the schema in (6) and (7) below to illustrate the contrast between English and Bātōnū in terms of headedness:

(6) $XP \rightarrow X \text{ Comp.}, \text{ or}$
 $XP \rightarrow X \text{ YP}$

(7) $XP \rightarrow \text{Comp. } X, \text{ or}$
 $XP \rightarrow \text{YP } X.$

(where in both (6) and (7) X stands for the lexical head of a phrase and YP stands for the complement).

3. Implication for Second Language Learning

The diversity of language-structure and its implications for language acquisition can be claimed to have prompted Noam Chomsky to come up with the idea of 'parameter-setting', as one of the unique features of UG, as developed within the framework of 'Principles and Parameters' theory.

According to Van Kemenade and Vincent (1997:3),

In parameter-setting model of language acquisition and change, the task of the language learner is to decide, on the basis of the evidence in her language environment, how to fill in the values for the various parametric options allowed by UG. Choosing the values for the parameters for any particular language is the main task of language acquisition.

The pedagogical implication of our comparison between the structures of English and those of Bātōnū, with specific reference to the issues of 'word order' and 'head parameter', has to do with the concept of *learnability*. In other words, it is assumed that the ability of a Bātōnū native speaker to understand the basic differences between his native language and English, will assist him in fixing the appropriate value for head parameter in learning English as a second language. He may as well learn quite a lot about the structure of his own language as a result of mentally comparing it with English.

4. Conclusion

Based on Blake's (1994) proposed diagnostics for distinguishing between SVO and SOV languages, this paper has described and exemplified the syntactic differences between English and Bātōnū, in terms of basic word order and head parameter. The major findings can be summarized as follows:

- (a) Whereas English exhibits SVO as its basic word order, Bātōnū exhibits SOV.
- (b) Whereas the value of head parameter among the phrases in English is "head first", the value of the parameter in Bātōnū is "head last".
- (c) Whereas English exhibits prepositional phrases, Bātōnū exhibits

It is assumed that our findings in this research will be of pedagogical importance to Bàtɔ̀nū native speakers learning English as a second language; as well as teachers teaching English to Bàtɔ̀nū native speakers as a second language; most especially in fixing the value for the head parameter in English.

Notes

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1. Nouns in each of the seven prominent noun classes and their class-markers can be exemplified as follows:

Class 1:	(bìi – wí] Child CM	'The child'
Class 2:	[tírè – té] Book CM	'The book'
Class 3:	[ním - mɛ] Water CM	'The water'
Class 4:	[bōō – gé] Goat CM	'The goat'
Class 5:	[dekā - yé] Goat CM	'The stick'
Class 6:	[gbèrè-ní] Maize CM	'The maize'
Class 7:	[yàkà-sí] Grass CM	'The grass'

2. Bàtɔ̀nū has not been officially reduced into writing. Published materials in the language are written with the I.P.A. symbols, as in Welmers (1952, 1973).

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