

Syntax and/or Pragmatics: PP Scrambling in Tongan and the Thematic Hierarchy

This paper argues that PP scrambling in Tongan (Polynesian) is constrained not only syntactically, but also by a pragmatic factor that interacts with the thematic hierarchy. The basic word order in Tongan is VSO, or VS(O)PP if a PP is present in a verbal construction (1). Scrambling in Tongan, illustrated in (2), has been analyzed as an obligatory movement to [Spec, T] licensed by two features on T: EPP and information focus (Otsuka 2003; cf. Miyagawa 2001, Bailyn 2003). Assuming that T does not permit multiple Specs in Tongan, this analysis correctly predicts that sentences involving multiple scrambling are ungrammatical (3). Some constraints on PP scrambling, however, cannot be readily explained in a strictly configurational approach.

First, scrambling is impermissible in a transitive construction (4a) although it does not involve multiple scrambling. One may argue that this is because ergative (ERG) NPs, but not absolutive (ABS) NPs, block the movement of a PP. The rationale for such a constraint is not very clear, for ERG NPs do not always create a barrier: for example, they do not block scrambling of ABS NPs. Alternatively, one may hypothesize that a PP in an intransitive construction occupies a structural position different from that in a transitive construction, whereby movement from the latter is configurationally impossible. Such an analysis does not work either, for PP scrambling is possible in transitive constructions if the subject is pronominal and cliticized onto T (4b).

Second, scrambling over an ERG NP is permissible if the relevant PP is an argument of a ditransitive verb such as *oange* “give” (5). This contrasts with the ungrammaticality of (4a), in which the relevant PP is an adjunct. One may argue that the contrast arises due to the structural difference between adjuncts and arguments. Yet, such an approach fails to account for the fact that adjunct PPs may undergo scrambling under certain conditions, as shown in (2a) and (4b).

I propose that these facts have to do with a pragmatic constraint that requires old information to be morpho-syntactically realized in a reduced form, e.g., pronouns rather than full noun phrases. I also argue that the constituent order observes the thematic hierarchy (6), which reflects the relative saliency of items in the unmarked context. That is, those that are ranked higher on the hierarchy are more likely to represent old information than those ranked lower (cf. Givón 1984). Hence, if a particular item (say, THEME) represents new information, any higher items (e.g., AGENT) most likely represent old information. In the present analysis, scrambling is construed as new information focus movement. This implies that whatever follows the scrambled phrase represents old information and is required to occur in a reduced form, if it is ranked higher in the hierarchy. In other words, a sentence is ungrammatical if a higher ranked phrase following the scrambled phrase is not realized as a pronoun. The data suggest that this constraint may be violated by exactly one higher ranked phrase: e.g., THEME following LOCATION.

The two facts can now be explained in terms of the proposed pragmatic constraint. First, the contrast between ABS and ERG NPs arises for the following reason. When a LOCATION PP is scrambled over an ABS NP, it precedes only one higher ranked phrase. In contrast, when scrambled over an ERG NP, it is followed by two higher ranked phrases, THEME and AGENT. (4b) is grammatical although scrambling crosses two higher ranked phrases THEME and AGENT. This is because AGENT is realized as a pronoun, satisfying the relevant condition. Second, the contrast between arguments and adjuncts arises because they bear different theta-roles: GOAL and LOCATION, respectively. Since GOAL is ranked the same as THEME, scrambling of an argument PP results in a legitimate pattern: GOAL is followed by only one higher ranked phrase, i.e., AGENT. To conclude, the current study shows that the scrambling facts in Tongan can be fully understood only if we take pragmatic as well as syntactic factors into consideration.

- (1) a. *Na'e 'alu 'a Sione ki Tonga.* [SUBJ-PP]
 PST go ABS Sione to Tonga
 “Sione went to Tonga”
 b. *Na'e tuku 'e Sione 'a e tohi 'i he loki.* [SUBJ-OBJ-PP]
 PST leave ERG Sione ABS the book in the room
 “Sione left the book in the room.”
- (2) a. *Na'e 'alu ki Tonga 'a Sione.* [PP-SUBJ]
 PST go to Tonga ABS Sione
 b. *Na'e tuku 'a e tohi 'e Sione 'i he loki* [OBJ-SUBJ-PP]
 PST leave ABS the book ERG Sione in the room
- (3) a. **Na'e tuku 'e Sione ['i he loki]_i 'a e tohi t_i.* *[SUBJ-PP-OBJ]
 b. **Na'e tuku ['i he loki]_j ['a e tohi]_i 'e Sione t_i t_j* *[PP-OBJ-SUBJ]
 c. **Na'e tuku ['a e tohi]_i ['i he loki]_j 'e Sione t_i t_j* *[OBJ-PP-SUBJ]
- (4) a. **Na'e tuku ['i he loki]_i 'e Sione 'a e tohi t_i.* *[PP-SUBJ-OBJ]
 PST leave in the room ERG Sione ABS the book
 “Sione left the book in the room.”
 b. *Na'a ne_j tuku ['i he loki]_i t_j 'a e tohi t_i.* [(SUBJ)-PP-OBJ]
 PST 3.s leave in the room ABS the book
 “He left the book in the room.”
- (5) *Na'e 'oange [kia Mele]_i 'e Sione 'a e fehu 'i t_i.* [PP-SUBJ-OBJ]
 PST give to Mele ERG Sione ABS the book
 “Sione gave Mele the book.”
- (6) Agent > Theme/Goal > Location > Instrument

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