SUMMER INSTITUTE OF LINGUISTICS
PUBLICATIONS IN LINGUISTICS
Publication Number 75

SENTENCE INITIAL DEVICES

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Editor

A Publication of
The Summer Institute of Linguistics
and
The University of Texas at Arlington

1986

Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 83-051455
ISBN 0-88312-096-8

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Introduction

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The order of constituents in a sentence is not as arbitrary as was once thought. There is an internal logic behind constituent ordering. It is not the same for every language, but it responds to a surprisingly small number of factors. Different languages weigh each factor differently.

Typologies remained somewhat uncertain until this began to be more clear. One could question, for example, whether a particular language had a basic verb-initial constituent order on the grounds that a significant number of its sentences started with nominals rather than verbs. Once linguists began to be sensitive to the variety of reasons there are why a nominal might appear at the beginning of a sentence, however, they were able to see that such occurrences did not really weaken the validity of the basic pattern.

At the same time, the excitement of seeing how the ordering of constituents works in a few languages may have obscured understanding of its total communicative possibilities. Much of the early work on word order was directed towards languages like Czech and Russian where word order communicates relatively little about grammatical relations. In those languages constituents are usually ordered along an increasing gradient that represents how much unexpected information each one contributes to the communication. Recognizing that gradient explains a good deal about what comes first and what comes later.

Then attention turned to word order in English. In English much of the ordering depends on grammatical relations, but an important amount of information other than just grammatical relations is also communicated by it. Two other factors that influence order became prominent: the importance of sentence-initial position for connection

with the topic on the one hand, and the increase in communicative dynamism toward the end of the sentence on the other hand. But someone needed to ask, either on grounds of pure logic or of going out and listening to how other languages work, whether those were the only possibilities.

From South America comes the observation that there is at least one other option that has to be taken into account for understanding word order: communicative dynamism may decrease rather than increase during a sentence. In two unrelated languages, Gavião of the Tupi family and Xavante of the Gê family, we have good evidence that the least predictable part of what a speaker is saying actually comes at the beginning. Most sentences get into more and more predictable material as they go on. Even though other languages related to these organize their information in the more popular way of putting what can be presupposed before what is being focused on informationally, at least we see now that starting with high redundancy is not a necessary strategy for communication. These two languages seem to be enough, for example, to call into question claims about the universal psychological validity of beginning with what is known and going on to what is unknown.

As for other phenomena that are associated with sentence-initial position, the South and Central American data we offer here seem to line up fairly well with the way the rest of the world talks. Connectives and interrogatives come at the beginning of sentences. Topics are frequently set up there. The participants in discourse are brought on stage with sentence-initial devices when they occupy certain roles in the discourse, but sneaked in as noninitial constituents in other cases. Redundant clauses that glue paragraphs together have grammatical affinities that show they are at the beginning of complex sentences rather than at the end. Collateral information (the kind that tells what might be rather than asserting what is—questions and counterexpectations are typically collateral) often gets tagged as such on its first constituent.

The papers in this collection are the result of two seminars held in Brazil and in Colombia, in the fall of 1976 and the spring of 1977 respectively. They were organized at the initiative of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. The first was held at the field station operated by the Institute near Pôrto Velho. The second was cosponsored by the Department of Systems Engineering and Computation of the University of the Andes in Bogotá in connection with a lecture series I gave there on artificial intelligence models in the analysis of natural languages. The participants came from the sponsoring institutions and others. Drafts of several of these papers have appeared locally in Spanish or Portuguese; the English versions, however, merit presentation as a

collection because of the view they provide on the way some imperfectly understood principles of language operate in languages that linguists have not heard much from yet.