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Principles and Parameters in a VSO Language: A Case Study in Welsh

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A significant portion of the world's languages have the basic word order of Verb-Subject-Object (VSO). Languages with this word order and its mirror image, the rarely found Object-Subject-Verb (OSV), have long been considered problematic within X-Bar theory, since they do not easily fit into a phrase structure with a subject and a verb phrase consisting of the verb and its complements. Do these languages simply have a flat structure with no real distinction between the subject and other arguments of the verb? If so, why would languages with these word orders be so different from languages with the other four word orders? These questions became more important as linguistic theories moved to a notion of all languages deriving from a single Universal Grammar. Various hypotheses for how VSO order is derived have been proposed over the years, with the most promising being movement of the verb out of the verb phrase to a position above the subject (Emonds 1980). But exactly where are these positions? Do all VSO languages have the same analysis? Within generative grammar, the details have been further complicated by the splitting of the functional projections into multiple projections (Pollock 1989) and the idea that all projections are head-initial, specifier-initial and complement-final (Kayne 1994).

This debate is the background for the book, which claims to be the first full-book study written in English of Welsh syntax using minimalist theory. (The title of the book specifies Principles and Parameters theory due to the emphasis on parameters, but the book also addresses more current issues within minimalism and the author seems to simply consider them parts of the same overall theory.) The central question being addressed is "Which values of which parameters of Universal Grammar determine VSO word order?" Various parameters have been suggested, but the author desires to limit parameters to those meeting two main criteria: they must be both typologizable, accounting for the patterns of language variation observed, and learnable, where a simple aspect of the data can be seen as a trigger for the language learner to experience the value of the parameter. These issues make the book of interest to typologists and language-acquisition specialists. A significant amount of Welsh data is provided throughout the book, making it also of interest from a descriptive standpoint.

Beyond these, the theorist will appreciate the preciseness with which the details of the clause structure are presented and argued for, as well as the technical issue of the status of the Extended Projection Principle (EPP). Since the EPP has been reinterpreted to mean more than simply that all clauses must have a subject, and that instead it must be in the highest specifier of IP (Chomsky 1995), it is definitely in question for VSO languages.

Chapter 1 discusses the phrase structure analysis of VSO languages. A rule of verb movement allows VSO languages to still have a VP, as noted above. Further, there is evidence for an underlying SVO order, since this order is found after an auxiliary in Welsh. In this case, the auxiliary fills the position the verb would move to, so no verb movement takes place. This same order after auxiliary elements is also true in Zapotec (C. Black 2000:212–215). The underlying SVO order is easily accounted for by assuming the Internal Subject Hypothesis (Koopman and Sportiche 1991), where the subject begins in the specifier of VP for all languages.

But which are the final positions for the verb and subject, given one or more functional projections above VP? Clear arguments are presented for Welsh that the subject must rise out of VP, including the adjacency requirement between the verb and subject; that discontinuous negation follows the subject and it can be shown to be above VP; and object-to-subject raising constructions allow for testing the position of the subject. The author then shows that VSO word order is not like the Verb-Second phenomenon (V2) in Germanic languages, which is analyzed as the verb moving to the head of the complementizer phrase (CP). V2 does not occur in embedded clauses, where the C position is filled, but VSO word order clearly occurs in both main and embedded clauses. Roberts looks at additional empirical issues to argue against the verb rising to C for Welsh VSO, and in the process adopts Rizzi's (1997) split-C system to explain differences between Welsh, Irish, English and German.

Having concluded that both the verb and the subject must occupy functional positions between V and C, the natural proposal (following Pollock 1989) is that the verb is in AgrS and the subject is immediately following it in the specifier of TP (with the I-system broken into Finite, Subject Agreement and Tense projections). According to Chomsky (1995, Chapter 4), this means that AgrS has weak D-features and strong V-features, and T has strong D-features for VSO languages. But what do these features correspond to? Roberts brings up what he calls the anti-agreement effect, where an overt plural third person subject must appear with a singular-marked verb. He claims that this is true of many VSO systems and all the Celtic ones. It is definitely not true of all VSO languages, however.

The problems of determining what the strong and weak features correspond to and how movement of the verb to an agreement projection can account for the anti-agreement effect are dealt with throughout the rest of the book. Chapter 2 looks at case assignment, agreement, and direct-object mutation data. Beginning with the status of the strong V-feature, the criteria of having verbal agreement in all simple tenses (Vikner 1997) is presented. Based on this criteria, Zapotec definitely does not have a strong V-feature since it does not have any verbal agreement at all, so I was interested to see where the author would take this. He first assumes that Welsh indeed has a very strong agreement system, but upon further study shows that the "subject agreement affixes" are instead subject clitics and that there is no real agreement at all. This is also the case in Zapotec. Any morphemes that mark the subject that are written on the verb are

simply subject pronouns that are phonological clitics (C. Black 2000:33–36). All four logical possibilities for the realization of agreement via subject clitics and verb-agreement have thus been recognized: Northern Italian dialects have both subject clitics and verb-agreement; Standard Italian, Greek, etc. have only verb-agreement; Mainland Scandanavian has neither; and Welsh and Irish (and Zapotec) have only subject clitics. The author then shows that the morphological characteristics are enough to "cause" the necessary movements, so the notions of "strong" and "weak" features are not necessary at all. Further, an analysis of the anti-agreement effect is given by splitting AgrS into Person and Number projections. This leads to an account of DP-movement determining case assignment in Welsh, instead of a feature-checking account. Nominative case (unmarked morphologically) is assigned to the DP in the specifier of one of the AgrS projections. The direct object mutation is argued to be overt evidence of the assignment of accusative case to the DP in the specifier of VP.

Chapter 3 then moves to the analysis of non-subjects which do not undergo mutation, covering possessors and how genitive case is assigned, the nature of the verbal noun as a kind of participle and the objects of non-finite verbs. Parallel to the clause structure, the structure of the nominal phrase in Welsh is seen as a DP, in which N always raises to Q (a functional projection between N and D), and N raises on to D when a non-pronominal Possessor is present in the specifier of NP.

Chapter 4 returns to the question of the structure of the C-system, for both Germanic V2 and the particle systems of Welsh and Breton. He shows that the particles fill operator head positions such as Force, Fin, and Neg. Claiming that declarative is the unmarked clause type leads to the conclusion that Fin[+finite] is interpreted as declarative. Welsh particles can be seen as fulfilling the requirement that this head position be phonetically filled. Germanic lacks these particles, so the Fin head is realized by verb movement. Further, the EPP is seen as the motivation for the XP movement, and this only applies when the Fin head is filled by movement. Therefore, the EPP is tied to a requirement for phonetic realization of a particular projection. Chapter 5 presents a technical way to re-incorporate head-movement into Chomsky's (2001) system.

Overall, the author has been successful in his goal of determining parameters involved in VSO word order that are both typologizable and learnable. The presence of subject clitics versus verb-agreement is certainly something crucial for a field linguist and language learner to observe. Though the discussion is likely too technical for the average field linguist, the insights into VSO word order and clause structure and the analysis of anti-agreement phenomenon are helpful. A personal application, besides the comparison to Zapotec, occurred while reading this book. I was writing rules for a computational syntactic parser for a Philippine language and was confronted with the problem of the second position clitics (2P). These 2P clitics differ from others (such as in Shipibo) that can be analyzed like V2 in filling the C position and requiring an XP in the specifier position (H. A. Black 1992). They are similar in content to the Welsh particles discussed in Chapter 4, but they also include the pronouns. These 2P clitics appear after a manner, reason or [+wh] adverb, or a negative auxiliary, or, if none of those are present, they occur after the verb. Multiple clitics may appear, with the pronouns first. The idea of the clitics being heads in a functional position that can merge with an appropriate lexical head via adjunction was very helpful for parsing.

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