

Non-peripheral flexible word order and the issue of (non-)configurationality in Taqbaylit Berber

Cross-linguistic variations in word order flexibility are explained in terms of (non-)configurationality. A language with (strict) order fixed by the syntactic functions of arguments is configurational. One with free order governed by discourse is discourse/non-configurational (Hale 1983, E. Kiss 1995, Baker 1996, Austin & Bresnan 2001). Many languages, however, display both configurational and non-configurational properties (Pensalfini 2004, van der Waal 2009). In such cases, it is unclear how much variation can be attributed to syntactic principles and how much to information packaging, especially for non-peripheral variations, which can be triggered by discourse (Mithun 1987, Belletti 2004, Poletto 2014) or a range of syntactic and semantic phenomena. Where discourse alone triggers flexibility, the question of which functions are involved can be raised, especially where a language already has peripheral positions for topic and focused arguments. Are there multiple topic/focus positions in a single language? Or are other discourse notions relevant?

Our talk addresses these questions focussing on flexible orders in non-peripheral parts of clauses in Taqbaylit Berber (Algeria). In Taqbaylit, arguments — S, A, P and G (goal argument of ditransitive verbs) — occur in the ‘unmarked’ order V-S/A-G-P. The majority of formal studies on Taqbaylit and related Berber languages, framed in Minimalism, presuppose a configurational structure in which S/A precede V while P and G follow it, in this order. The surface V-first order is derived by movement of V out of VP to higher functional heads (Ouhalla 1988, Boukhris 1998, Belkadi 2010, Ouali 2011, El Ankari 2014). Alternations to the V-first order are frequent and triggered by left-dislocation of arguments associated with topicality (Mettouchi & Fleisch 2010, Mettouchi 2018, Lafkioui 2015). In previous studies, these topic driven shifts have led to proposals that Taqbaylit is ‘discourse configurational’ (Calabrese 1987, Mettouchi 2018).

In our talk, we aim to complement this work on discourse configurationality in Taqbaylit. We will present preliminary results of a project analysing the syntactic, semantic, discourse and prosodic properties of arguments occurring in different clause internal positions. We will show that some of these orders are syntactically driven. For instance, arguments occurring in complex constituents tend to surface last in the clause (cf. also Mettouchi 2011) regardless of their grammatical role. Obliques which consist of a preposition governing a lexical noun tend to occur last while those that consist of a preposition and a pronominal clitic are shifted to a more internal position, often adjacent to the verb. However, we will argue that an exclusively syntactic analysis cannot account for all alternations and possibilities. There are contexts in which complex oblique constituents occur in the direct post-verbal position before arguments. Furthermore, P and G can occur in the direct post-verbal position and precede A under certain circumstances. We will suggest that discourse indeed play a role here and that notions as prominence (Mithun 1986, Himmelmann et Primus 2015) and degree of activation (Givón 1995) may also be useful in explaining these word order permutations.

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