

An Examination of Word Order Typology and the Role it Plays in Second Language Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

Classifying languages based on their structural types is referred to as language typology. Unlike traditional classifications, language typology pays keen attention to the practical uses of languages. This paper examines the nature of word order typology. Languages can be grouped by their basic sentence structures. SVO, SOV and VSO are common while VOS, OSV and OVS occur rarely. When it comes to second language acquisition, this word order plays a great role. As subconscious language acquisition is more powerful when learning a second language, word order errors may occur due to the influence of the first language. On the other hand, learning a language which belongs to the same category according to the word order typology will be easier than learning a language with a different sentence structure. When teaching and learning a second language, it's important to identify the role of word order typology. Finally, it is suggested that word order typology should be identified when teaching and learning Tamil language as a second language by Sinhalese.

Keywords - Language Typology, Second Language Acquisition, Word Order Typology

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the classification of languages commonly referred to as language typology. Typology can be understood using three linguistic delineations.

1. A classification of structural types across languages.
2. The study of patterns that occur systematically across languages.
3. An approach or theoretical framework to the study of language that contrasts with prior approaches. [1]

Greenberg's (1966) study found that there were thirty languages that were categorised according to the relative order of their verbs, subjects and objects. After that, grammarians began to classify language types according

to their patterns. Different researches such as Silverstein, Comrie, Dixon and Shibatani have classified languages based on functions such as case-marking systems, aspect, causative constructions, conditional clauses, relative clauses and adjectives. The University of Cologne spearheaded the initial research on language typology and it is the publications from these researchers that led to new developments in the field of typological studies.[3]

In the late 1970s, three researchers contributed to the development of studies on language universals and typology. Dik (1978) founded the functional theory of grammar which formed the basis for other typological studies. Additionally, Greenberg's (1978) ten-year longitudinal research project at Stanford University which revealed the phonological, morphological and syntactic universals of languages. Similarly, Given (1979) contributed to the field with the introduction of cross-linguistic researches. The 1980s also ushered in a new era in which, wide range of articles and books on language typology were being published by grammarians.[3]

There are many approaches to language typology and word-order typology is one of them.

2. METHODOLOGY

As this is a qualitative study, it is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching. After selecting two groups of students as samples, Tamil language is taught to them as their second language. While language is taught to one group without paying attention to the word order typology, it is greatly concerned when teaching the other group. After teaching them for a year, final results can be evaluated.

3. WORD-ORDER TYPOLOGY

When languages are classified according to their basic sentence structure, this is referred to as word-order typology. Through this classification six possible orders can be identified: SVO, SOV, VSO, VOS, OSV and OVS.[3]

Table I: Six Possible Word Orders

SVO	I came home.
SOV	I home came.
VSO	Came I home.
VOS	Came home I.
OSV	Home I came.
OVS	Home came I.

SVO and SOV are the most common word orders and SVO is commonly used in languages such as English and French, SOV on the other hand is easily identified in languages such as Japanese, Turkish and Tamil.

I am going home. - English

S V O

Watashi wa uchi e ikimasu. - Japanese

S O V

Nān vīttitku pōhirēn. - Tamil

S O V

SOV can be identified in Dutch, Quechua and Lakota also.

SVO

English: The dog ate my homework.

SOV

Dutch: De hond eft miin huiswerk opgegeten.

Quechua: Alqoqa tareayta mikhorqa.

Lakot: Shunka ki wowapi mithawa ki yuha thebiye.[7]

Though German has both patterns, SVO in main clauses and SOV in subordinate clauses, it has been classified as a SVO language.

Languages such as Welsh and Hawaiian have VSO.

Hawaiin: Ua’ ai ka ilio I ko’u ha’awina pili home.[7]

(Ate the dog my homework.)

Malagasy is a language that has VOS.

Nihinana ny fianarako ny alika.[7]

(Ate my lesson the dog.)

OVS can be identified in languages like Hixkaryana.

Dyirbal is a language without any basic word order.[6]

The following table has been created based on a study on the 30 language sample by Greenberg.

Table II: Greenburg’s Study on 30 Languages

Basque	SOV
Berber	VSO
Burmese	SOV
Burushaski	SOV
Chibcha	SOV
Finnish	SVO
Fulani	SVO

Greek	SVO
Guarani	SVO
Hebrew	VSO
Hindi	SOV
Italian	SVO
Kannada	SOV
Japanese	SOV
Loritja	SOV
Malay	SVO
Maori	VSO
Masai	VSO
Maya	SVO
Norwegian	SVO
Nubian	SOV
Quechua	=SOV
Serbian	SVO
Songhai	SVO
Swahili	SVO
Thai	SVO
Turkish	SOV
Welsh	VSO
Yoruba	SVO
Zapotec	VSO

In Latin however, the meaning of the sentence is understood by the spelling, not by the word order.

English: The dog bites the man.

Latin: Hominem canis mordet.

Hominem mordet canis.

Canis mordet hominem.

Canis hominem mordet.

Mordet canis hominem.

Mordet hominem canis.

English: The man bites the dog.

Latin: Homo canem mordet.

Homo mordet canem.

Canem mordet homo.

Canem homo mordet.

Mordet canem homo.

Mordet homo canem.[7]

4. SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND WORD ORDER

We cannot underestimate the impact an individual's native language has on the acquisition of a second language. In fact many of the errors made when using a second language may be attributed to the structure of the second language learnt.[4] The "Monitor Theory of adult second language acquisition" purports that second language acquisition depends on two independent systems.

- Subconscious language acquisition
- Conscious language learning[4]

The influence of the first language is more powerful when it comes to subconscious language acquisition because the individual is used to work with own language and he has those language patterns in his mind.

According to research findings, there are some situations where the impact of first language can be implicitly seen. For example, errors in bound morphology when using a second language are not due to the influence of the first language, but the first plays a great role in word-to-word translations.[4]

LoCoco (1975) substantiated this claim when he pointed out that American college students make mistakes when learning German due to the word order errors.

Hopefully you are healthy.

Incorrect: Hoffentlich du bist gesund.

Correct: Hoffentlich bist du gesund.

I am happy to be here.

Incorrect: Ich bin glücklich sein hier.

Correct: Ich bin glücklich hier zu sein.[4]

We have identified that languages such as Japanese and Tamil word orders are SOV making it difficult for an English speakers due to the differences in sentence structure. Although the average individual will try to remember the word-order unique to the new language being learnt through conscious language learning, subconscious language acquisition undoubtedly influence their learning and cause them to translate according to the word- order used in their first language. This occurs because in learning a second language, acquiring sentence patterns is more difficult than acquiring vocabulary. Vocabulary is learnt by giving a prominent place to conscious language learning, but subconscious language acquisition greatly contributes when constructing sentences with the second language.

Learning Tamil will be easier if the individual's first language is Japanese. This is because even.

Though both languages don't belong to same group according to traditional classifications, second language acquisition will be easier if they belong to a same group according to word order typology.

Ideally the best approach to teach a new language should be done using a language that is classified using the same word order. For example in teaching Sinhalese to Korean students utilizing the word order used in English, I noticed that the main hindrance in translation occurred because of would be the sentence structure.

For example in translating the sentence "I eat rice" is "Mama bath kanavā" not "Mama kanavā bath" in Sinhala. The words are translated easily, however the sentence structure is problematic.

Importance of Word order Typology in Teaching Tamil As a Second Language to the Native Sinhalese Speaker

Teaching Tamil as a second language to native Sinhalese speakers is extremely beneficial as both languages belong to the same word order category even though they are members of two different language families. Simple sentences like "I am reading the newspaper", are translated as "Naan paththiriheyi vaasikkiren".

English – SVO

I am reading the newspaper.

Sinhala – SOV

Mama paththarayak kiyavanava.

Tamil - SOV

Naan paththiriheyi vaasikkiren.

Though the word order is similar, students make significant errors when they are translating from Sinhalese to Tamil or vice versa.

Data will be collected by observing Sinhala teachers who teach Tamil as a second language to Sinhala students. It can be done by visiting selected schools. Sinhala teachers focus on teaching their students about sentence structures and patterns when teaching Tamil. However that attention should be placed on vocabulary and other grammar rules as native speakers of Sinhalese can easily acquire the patterns in Tamil with the help of subconscious language acquisition.

Contrastingly, it can be seen where some teachers are trying to teach Tamil to Sinhala students using English. This has proven to be effective however specific emphasis must be placed on explaining the differences in sentence structure which makes teaching and learning Tamil

through the Sinhala medium the easier option.

Here are some sentence structures found in Tamil and Sinhala.

- S - Pota mese uda tiyanava
 T - Pottakam meecayile irukku
 S - Mama kiyavana pota
 T - Naan vaacikkira pottakam
 S - Mama pihiyen paan kapanava
 T - Naan kattiyaala paan vetran
 S - Mama ande nidaagannava
 T - Naan kattilla patukkiran
 S - Mama maalata salli dunna
 T - Naan maalaakku kaacu kututtan
 S - Maamage kakula kedila
 T - Maamaata kaal murinci poocci
 S - Mama taatta ekka giya
 T - Naan vaappaavoota poonan
 S - Mama gama indala ava
 T - Naan uurilarundu vantana
 S - Kamalta vadaa Sunil hondata liyanava
 T - Kamala vita Sunil nalla elutuvaan
 S - Eyaa pintuure gena kataakalaa
 T - Avan padattappatri peecinaan [5]

In the examples shown the SOV pattern isn't being changed even though the sentences are written in various ways. This means that the average student can construct sentences using word to word translation if he knows the vocabulary and grammar patterns. This is the greatest advantage of teaching Tamil through Sinhala medium. It is very important to be familiar with word order typology when teaching or learning Tamil as a second language.

6. CONCLUSION

Though grammarians have developed various aspects of language typologies, the question about whether or not it can be applied to the acquisition of a new language arises. The answer to this question is simple. Though

knowledge about traditional classifications are important, word order typology has practical uses.

Subconscious language acquisition plays an integral role in acquiring second language. However the word order of the individual's first language is used when constructing sentences from the second language by many students causing errors to occur.

Acquiring a second language is also easier if it belongs to the same word order typology as the first language. This method is however rarely used in the teaching and learning of Tamil in Sri Lanka. Sinhala teachers and students do not take this point into their consideration. However as both Tamil and Sinhala have SOV, effective results can be gained by understanding word order typology when teaching and learning Tamil as a second language.

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