

Relativization in Formosan languages: a Greenbergian nightmare?

Arthur Holmer

Since Greenberg (1966), it has been known that there are more or less robust correlations between word order patterns at different levels of the clause. This is less true when it comes to ordering within NP, but one pattern still seems to be quite reliable: if a language has V-O order, it will also have N-Rel order (i.e. Rel-N order is only found in OV languages), while the converse (N-Rel in an OV language) is quite common. Thus, it appears while relativization ordering correlates with OV/VO order, N-Rel is dominant. Dryer (1992) mentions a single exception: Chinese, which is SVO but has Rel-N order. Given that Chinese is noticeably head-final in some other ways as well, it is perhaps not very surprising that the exception, if there is one, would be Chinese.

What is completely unexpected, on the other hand, is an order such as that found in the Formosan languages Bunun (1), and Tsou (2), which display Rel-N as the unmarked order, despite the fact that their clause-level word order is VSO (Bunun) and VOS (Tsou).

1. mundaan ca [[m-in-a'u-s hutan a] uva'az]
go NOM AF-PST-eat-ACC sweet.potato REL child
'The child that ate sweet potatoes left.'
2. aimt-ɪ na'n-o pak'i na [[m-o eaokoa ci] cmoi]
really-AF very-AF angry.AF DET AF-PST with.child REL bear
'A bear which has a cub is really very angry.' (Szakos 1994)

These languages therefore pose a serious challenge to traditional Greenbergian typology (according to which, verb-initial languages are the most prototypical VO languages). This paper discusses possible accounts which can solve this problem.

Two important points to note are that Austronesian relativization is obligatorily subject-oriented, and that the most basic word order pattern in Formosan languages is VOS. Taken together, these facts could conspire to create a linear order which on the surface appears to be Rel-N, if we can analyse this type of construction as an internally headed relativization, i.e. a linearly embedded matrix clause with typical matrix order VOS. This view tallies rather well with the fact it is quite common in Formosan languages to express subordination and modification with typical matrix elements.

This can not be the only solution, however: in several Formosan languages, Rel-N alternates with N-Rel, and when this occurs, it is Rel-N which normally expresses restrictive relativization, while N-Rel expresses non-restrictive relativization. If Rel-N were an embedded matrix construction, we would instead expect the opposite relation to hold.

Based on data from a variant of Seediq where Rel-N does not occur, but where circumnominal relativization is possible, it is instead suggested that Rel-N order is the result of ordering determined by information structure, following a principle common in Formosan (and presumably Austronesian as a whole), namely that new information precedes old information. Possible typological consequences of this view are outlined.