HEAD AND DEPENDENT-MARKING IN ISOLATING LANGUAGES: THE CASE OF COMPARATIVES IN SINITIC

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Introduction

The typological distinction between head and dependent-marking patterns (HM/DM: Nichols 1986) has so far been applied largely to morphological marking of grammatical relations. This distinction has yet to be systematically applied to grammatical markers in the syntactic domain in isolating languages, where affixation of grammatical morphemes is at most limited. The consequent exclusion of isolating languages from typological investigations involving the HM/DM parameter presents an important theoretical gap, which we aim to bridge in this paper.

In this paper we suggest an extension of Nichols' notion from morphological marking to cases where the marker is in constituency with the head or the dependent within a given grammatical construction, constituency being established through standard constituency tests. To illustrate this we focus on comparative constructions in Sinitic languages, where the comparative relation may be marked by a marker in constituency with the adjectival predicate (head) or standard NP (dependent).

By applying the HM/DM typology in this way, we obtain a particularly interesting result with respect to the diversity of the Sinitic languages. We will see that five different marking patterns are found, corresponding to the main logical possibilities described in Nichols' (1986) typology: head-marked, dependent-marked, double-marked, zero-marked and possibly neutral-marked. Thus, the HM/DM distinction helps to capture and reveal diversity within a single language family. This is an especially unexpected result in the case of Chinese, which is widely assumed to be, if not grammatically, then at least typologically homogenous.

The theoretical implication of this approach is that even in strongly isolating languages such as Sinitic, head-marking and dependent marking grammatical patterns can be established.

1. Head-marking and dependent-marking in isolating languages

The distinction between head-marking (HM) and dependent-marking (DM) grammar as made by Nichols (1986) has proved to be a productive one in several areas of both synchronic and diachronic investigation. The typological significance of the HM/DM distinction includes the following considerations:

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(i) basic word order has proved a less precise and less holistic parameter than was once hoped;

(ii) Unlike word order, HM/DM type is diachronically relatively stable (Nichols 1992)

(iii) HM/DM does correlate with other typological characteristics, including word order patterns (in particular, head-marking favours verb-initial order: Nichols 1992)

One question to arise is this: since the HM/DM distinction applies most readily to languages of some morphological complexity, what of isolating languages such as those of the Southeast Asian mainland? We see at least three logical possibilities:

(i) The HM/DM distinction is generally inapplicable in isolating languages because there is little or no "marking" of the requisite kind;

(ii) The distinction is applicable but most of the "marking" of grammatical relations is of the 'neutral' (Nichols 1986) or 'detached' (Nichols 1992) type, i.e. neither HM nor DM;

(iii) The distinction is applicable but "marking" needs to be understood in an extended sense.

We may ask why the possibility of applying the HM/DM distinction in isolating languages (hinted at by Nichols 1986: 59) has not been pursued, to our knowledge. We suspect that linguists have assumed answer (i) or (ii), neither of which suggests a productive research area. If (i) is actually the case, then the distinction is less pervasive than it might have appeared, since it rules out by definition the possibility of including morphologically less complex languages in any typology referring to the HM/DM parameter; with regard to (ii), we shall show that although there are indeed cases of neutral marking, there are many cases where HM or DM patterns can be identified. Pursuing answer (iii), we shall suggest that the distinction can usefully be made, but that "marking" needs to be understood in an extended sense of "in constituency with". After showing how this applies in the case of possession and complementation, we shall show how it provides a valid typological parameter in the analysis of comparative constructions in Sinitic languages, which we take to be representative of isolating typology in general. We will develop in particular a synchronic typology of comparative constructions based on the HM/DM distinction (originally developed in Ansaldo 1999).

1.1 HM/DM in analytic structures: the case of possession

Nichols (1986) focuses on morphological marking of grammatical relations such as possession, which offers a particularly clear illustration of the distinction:

1. dependent-marked: sensei-no hon (Japanese)
   teacher-POSS book
   'the teacher's book'

2. head-marked: istvén kocsi-ja (Hungarian)
   Steven car-3sg
   'Steven's car'

In Japanese the possessive relationship is indicated on the dependent, by the suffix no, rather than the head of the NP (hon 'book'). In Hungarian, the same relationship is
indicated by a suffix, -ja on the head noun, while the dependent (possessor) is left unmarked.

While acknowledging the “fundamental distinction” made by Nichols, Vincent (1993: 140-1) raises the question about its application to analytic structures such as the Italian:

(3) figlio di Dio (Italian)
    son of God

Vincent notes that “In such instances there is a separate element, the preposition di or “of”, whose function seems to be to mark the dependency” (ibid). What we wish to suggest in this paper is that the distinction can be made in terms of constituency. On this analysis, the marking of possession by di is a dependent-marked structure in the sense that [di Dio] forms a constituent, including the marker of possession and the dependent possessor, within the Noun Phrase:

(3a)
    NP
    /  \ 
    NP  PP
    /   \ 
   /   P NP
   figlio  di  Dio

The evidence for constituency here includes:

(i) question-answer sequences:

(4) 'figlio di chi? - [Di dio]
    is son of who  of God
    “Whose son is he? – God’s”

(ii) preposing, whereby either the possessor or the possessed can be fronted:

(5a) [di Paola] non conosco il marito (topicalization)
    of Paola not know-1sg the husband
    “Paola I don’t know the husband of.”

(5b) [il marito] non conosco [di Paola] (focusing)
    the husband not know-1sg of Paola.
    “The husband of Paola I don’t know (but I know her sister, etc)”

In each case, the marker di remains in constituency with the possessor, Paola. These constituency tests argue that the construction is dependent-marked.

Similarly, consider a possessive construction found in several dialects of German, as illustrated in (6):

(6) Dem Wolfgang sein Lied (Austrian German)
    the-DAT Wolfgang his song
    ‘Wolfgang’s song’

Here the possessive relation is marked by (a) the dative case assigned to the Determiner dem (cf. the Hungarian example (2) above, where dative is marked by a suffix) and (b) the possessive adjective sein. Clearly, the Determiner is in constituency with the name Wolfgang and sein with the possessed N, Lied. The construction may thus be characterized as double-marked using Nichols’ typology; the only difference between
these and Nichols' examples is that neither of these elements indicating possession is morphologically attached to the Nouns concerned.

If this argumentation is correct for analytic structures in languages of moderate morphological complexity such as German and Italian, there is no reason why the same criteria should not apply in predominantly isolating (analytic) languages. In explicitly excluding isolating languages from her original typology, Nichols offers the following tantalising suggestion:

"Languages of the isolating type will be left out of the discussion entirely, although their 'grammatical words', 'function words', 'empty words' etc. presumably also exhibit head-marking and dependent-marking tendencies." (Nichols 1986: 59).

Although Nichols does not pursue this idea explicitly, she does so implicitly in the process of illustrating how the head/dependent-marking distinction applies with respect to subordination. Nichols gives the following English examples:

(7) dependent-marked: Since I was tired, I overslept

(8) head-marked: I was tired, so I overslept (Nichols 1986, p. 64)

By treating the subordinate clause as a dependent of the main clause – an assumption which seems uncontroversial – Nichols assimilates the marking of subordination to the head/dependent-marking typology.¹ At the same time, given that the distinction can be made without any morphological marking, as in English (since and so), she effectively extends the notion of “marking” from bound morphemes to function words herself. This gives us every reason to believe that our extension of the HM/DM distinction is in line with Nichols’ original insight.

2. Comparative constructions in Sinitic

We have suggested that the HM/DM distinction can usefully be applied to analytic structures, along the lines originally implied by Nichols and Vincent. We now outline in some detail how a HM/DM typology might look. By looking at the patterning of comparative markers in comparisons of inequality we shall see that HM, DM and other patterns can be identified in Sinitic languages. This will illustrate how structural diversity in isolating languages can be usefully described in terms of the HM/DM distinction.

The elements at issue in the typology are:

(i) Head: the head of the construction is the Adjective (or adjectival verb, to the extent that adjectives do not form a distinct category in Sinitic languages):

[AP more ADJ than me]

The status of the adjective as head of the phrase is consistent with fact that, for example, the specifier more and the complement [than me] may be omitted.

(ii) Dependent: the dependent element is the standard (or object) of comparison:

more ADJ [than me]

The phrase [than me] is dependent on the Adjective since it can only be interpreted with respect to the property stated by the Adjective.

¹ Nichols acknowledges that the term “subordination” carries a certain bias in favour of dependent-marked structures. Indeed, ‘canonical subordination is a consequence of the choice of dependent-marking strategies.’ (Nichols 1986:64) In HM languages we have dependency without subordination, or co-subordination.