Mon Khmer Word Order from a Crosslinguistic Perspective

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Mon-Khmer languages overwhelmingly exhibit word order properties that can be described as head-initial. If we ask why we find this strong tendency for consistent head-initial order among Mon-Khmer languages, a popular answer is that languages tend to be consistently head-initial or consistently head-final, and Mon-Khmer languages are simply instances of the former type. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Dryer 1988, 1991, 1992), the assumption that languages tend to be consistently head-initial or head-final is not true, that the order of a number of kinds of modifiers with respect to their heads does not exhibit any crosslinguistic correlation with the order of verb and object. I will discuss alternative explanations for the pattern we find in Mon-Khmer languages.1

The table in (1) summarizes properties that can be said to characterize languages which are consistently head-final or consistently head-initial.

(1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Head-final</th>
<th>Head-initial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>verb occurs last, following subject, object, adpositional phrases, adjuncts, adverbs</td>
<td>verb precedes object, adpositional phrases, adjuncts, adverbs, though not necessarily the subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>postpositions</td>
<td>prepositions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noun occurs last in noun phrase</td>
<td>noun occurs first in noun phrase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modifiers in general precede the modified element</td>
<td>modifiers in general follow the modified element</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The examples in (2) (from Jacob 1968) illustrate how Khmer conforms to the general characteristics of head-initial languages.

(2) Khmer

a. VO

ʔoːpük thuvː tūː
father make cupboard
‘Father is making a cupboard’ (p. 262)
b. Verb - Nominal Adjunct
p?o:n t?u sa:la:-r?en (p. 262)
younger.sibling go school
'(My) younger brother/sister is going to school'

c. Verb - Verbal Adjunct
vi:ə t?u r?h?as
3SG go quick
'He goes quickly' (p. 79)

d. Noun-Adjective
pht?o:h to:c
house small
'a small house' (p. 60)

e. Noun-Genitive (i.e. noun possessor)
pht?o:h ti:
house old.man
'the old man's house' (p. 263)

f. Noun-Possessor (i.e. pronoun possessor)
?o:p?uk k?nom
father 1SG
'my father' (p. 60)

g. Noun-Numeral
pht?o:h pi:r
house two
'two houses' (p. 62)

h. Noun-Demonstrative
b?ntup nih
room this
'this room / these rooms' (p. 64)

i. Noun-Interrogative
pht?o:h na:
house which
'which house' (p. 266)

j. Adjective-Intensifier
thm?u nas
new very
'very new'

As shown by Dryer (1992), a number of the word order characteristics illustrated for Khmer in (2) are indeed typical of VO languages. These include the characteristics listed in (3).
(3) Typical VO characteristics (Greenberg 1963, Dryer 1992)

Noun-Genitive
Noun-Relative Clause
Prepositions
Verb-PP
Verb-Adverb
Adjective-Marker-Standard
etc.

However, some of the characteristics of Khmer illustrated in (2) are not typical of VO languages, despite their involving head-initial order. These include those listed in (4).

(4) Typical Mon-Khmer but NOT typical VO characteristics

Noun-Adjective
Noun-Demonstrative
Adjective-Intensifier

Below, I will illustrate each of these characteristics from other Mon-Khmer languages, and present data from a database containing data for over 750 languages that these are not typical VO characteristics.

The examples in (5) illustrate the noun-adjective order from a number of Mon-Khmer languages.

(5) a. Vietnamese

nhà    nhỏ
house  small
‘a small house’ (Thompson 1965: 221)

b. Palaung

rapyā  kāriār
girl   beautiful
‘the beautiful girl’ (Milne 1921: 38)

c. Khmu?

kòn    lā?
man    good
‘a good man’ (Premsrirat 1987: 30)
d. Katu

\textit{ao tam}
\textit{shirt black}
\textquote{‘a black shirt’} (Costello 1969: 30)

e. Stiëng

\textit{nhi gêq}
\textit{house small}
\textquote{‘small house’} (Miller 1976: 24)

f. Chrau

\textit{iër måq}
\textit{chicken large}
\textquote{‘a large chicken’} (Thomas 1971: 139)

g. Sre

\textit{caw-?ûr hàn\textsf{j}}
\textit{woman beautiful}
\textquote{‘the beautiful woman’} (Manley 1972: 156)

h. Sedang

\textit{məngê ‘mei}
\textit{person evil}
\textquote{‘evil person’} (Smith 1979: 77)

i. Mon

\textit{hœ? hnòk}
\textit{house large}
\textquote{‘a large house’} (Bauer 1982: 333)

The data in (6) below illustrates the distribution of AN versus NA order among VO languages from my database. The data is organized in the following way (cf. Dryer 1989a, 1992). First, I have classified the languages into genetic groups, which I call genera, which are roughly comparable to the subfamilies of Indo-European, and the numbers in (6) represent the number of genera containing languages of each type. In addition, I group these genera into six large geographic areas and count the number of genera within each area. For example, the ‘5’ in the upper lefthand corner of (6) indicates that there are 5 genera in Africa containing languages in my database which are VO and AN, while the ‘32’ below it indicates that there are 32 genera in