

Linguistic typology and Sinospheric languages

Elizabeth Riddle and Herbert Stahlke
Ball State University

1. Introduction

The well-known fact that Chinese and many Southeast Asian, or Sinospheric languages (Matisoff 1990:113), share a number of characteristics (Matisoff 1976; Matisoff 1986) is commonly attributed to contact influence. However, less well known to Southeast Asianists is the fact that some of the same properties cluster in a number of Kwa and Benue-Congo (Niger-Congo) languages spoken in West Africa as well. Foley and Olson (1985) note that these languages share the following properties with many languages of Southeast Asia: phonemic tone, a tendency toward monosyllabicity, isolating morphology, verb medial word order, and verb serialization. We have observed other shared properties as well. Since there is no question of contact influence between these two regions, some other explanation for this clustering must be sought unless it is to be considered merely coincidental.

In this paper we sketch a typology, involving what we call the Specification Scale, which offers a rationale for the clustering of similar morphological and syntactic properties of some representative languages from the two geographic areas, namely Mandarin Chinese, White Hmong, Thai, and Vietnamese from East and Southeast Asia, and Yoruba, Yatye, and Ewe from West Africa. The last three are Niger-Congo languages belonging to different subgroups of the Kwa (Ewe) and Benue-Congo (Yoruba and Yatye) subgroups within Niger-Congo (Bendor-Samuel 1989), with a time depth of differentiation probably similar to that of Indo-European.

2. Shared Properties

Matisoff (1986) provides a convenient listing of many Southeast Asian areal properties. Among these are tone,

relatively isolating morphology, verb concatenation, reduplication as an adverbializing process, and adjectives as a subclass of verbs. Tone, isolating morphology, and verb concatenation or serialization also occur in Foley and Olson's list of properties shared between Sinospheric and West African languages. They list SVO word order as a shared characteristic as well, but this does not show up as a clustering property when our typology is applied to other languages in either area. Lahu and Ijo, for example, are SOV and serializing, and Ewe shows some SOV traits. We will therefore ignore SVO word order although the seven languages we deal with here all have this as the basic main clause order. In addition to Matisoff's and Foley and Olson's lists, we have found that they also share the following properties: reduplication in general, compounding as a major word formation strategy, "underspecification" of some word classes (for example, words with adjectival and prepositional meanings frequently cannot be differentiated clearly from verbs by means of morphosyntactic criteria), and relatively restrictive phonotactic and morpheme structure constraints.

3. Rationale for clustering

Foley and Olson (1985:51) offer the following rationale for the clustering which they observed:

This cluster of properties is not accidental; they are all interrelated. Phonological attrition causes syncope of segments or syllables, with the result that phonemic tone or complex vowel systems develop to compensate for phonemic distinctions being lost. On the grammatical side, phonological attrition causes gradual loss of bound morphemes, which, being prefixes or suffixes, are most at risk to loss. With respect to noun phrases, this means loss of case marking, with the result that word order becomes rigid, in order to distinguish the semantic roles of noun phrases. Verb-medial order seems most favored in this function because the verb separates the actor and the undergoer and no ambiguity is possible. With the verb, phonological attrition gradually reduces verbal morphology. Now, valence increasing and decreasing are functions of verbal morphology (Comrie 1985). As this verbal morphology is lost, a

new device for valence adjustment must be found. Verb serialization begins to be used in this function, provided no new pattern is being created. Rather, the function of an already existing pattern is simply extended. In sum, then, the use of serial constructions to indicate valence increases is a function of the isolating structure of these languages.

We modify and extend this rationale to propose a general typology of language in which all the clustering properties find a natural explanation. Specifically, we propose that a useful dimension along which languages can be compared is the way and degree to which they overtly specify dependency relationships in surface structure. We suggest that there are two polar prototypical target structures to which languages adhere to varying degrees, overspecification and underspecification of relationships in surface structure. Overspecification in syntax involves a strong tendency to signal dependence by means of redundant grammaticized markers, such as, for example, the combination of prepositions and case in Classical Latin or gender and number concord in Bantu. In word formation, attachment of a dependent, bound form to a more dominant stem is very common, for example, noun morphology in Finnish. Languages characterized by underspecification tend to signal relations by word order and by the use of independent lexical items in both syntax and morphology, for example, the lexical expression of tense and aspect or the widespread use of body part nouns for temporal and spatial relations in Yoruba and many other West African languages.

4. Target Structure

The concept of target structure has appeared in various forms in linguistic theory but has been most clearly applied to syntax by Green (1974; 1980) and Haiman (1974), based on the notion "phonological conspiracy" discussed in Kisseberth (1970), among others. A target structure arises when several distinct rules "conspire" to produce the same result in surface structure. For example, Green (1980) claims that in English there are two target inversion structures derived from a large variety of syntactic constructions. Haiman argues that the verb second position in German main

clauses is a target structure. Riddle (1990) proposes parataxis as a target structure for White Hmong.

This notion has been applied primarily to individual phenomena within languages. We propose that overspecification and underspecification are two different extreme targets for languages as a whole, cutting across varied phenomena in syntax and morphology, in addition to being targets for individual aspects of grammar. These are prototypical targets to which languages and constructions conform in varying degrees. Thus some languages strongly overspecify relations in surface structure, some strongly underspecify them, and still others fall in between, depending in part on the degree to which semantic and pragmatic information is redundantly grammaticized.

5. Overspecification vs. Underspecification

Prototypical underspecification and overspecification provide the endpoints of a scale along which a number of seemingly disparate grammatical phenomena can be ranged and thus interrelated.

Prototypically underspecifying languages have juxtaposition and the inclusion of independent lexical items as their primary signals of semantic dependencies. There are fewer grammaticized indicators of particular semantic dependencies than in overspecifying languages. Examples are the parataxis of clauses, verb serialization, and the compounding of free morphemes. Linguistic elements are often not anchored to each other by overt tagging such as in case marking. Interclausal relations and argument structure tend to manifest themselves through linear order rather than through grammaticization.

Prototypically overspecifying languages emphasize the grammatical dependence of one element upon another, forming pairs (or groups) of dominant and dominated elements such as main vs. subordinate clauses and free vs. bound morphemes. Grammaticized markers overtly signal the semantic dependencies of surface elements to each other and explicitly tag certain elements as "belonging together" grammatically, as in case marking.