An Explanation for Inconsistent Word Order Typologies in Some Southeast Asian Languages

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the conclusion to Starosta’s treatise on Lexicase, he states, “Areas in which lexicase has a promising but as yet unrealized potential to make significant contributions to linguistic knowledge include ... language typology ...” (1988, p. 258). In this paper we would like to begin to explore some problems in the word order typology of Southeast Asian (SEA) languages, using lexicase as the theoretical framework within which to seek explanations. We will step into one of the well-trodden areas of linguistic structure in Southeast Asia, that of quantifier constructions, an area in which Professor Vichin Panupong (1970, pp. 56–66) led the way by providing, from a structuralist point of view, the earliest insightful description for Thai.

It is our purpose to show that some of the apparent anomalies in the typological characteristics of quantifier constructions are resolved when they are analyzed within the constraints of lexicase. Along the way we shall digress into the structure of noun phrases containing lexical items translated as adjectives in certain Philippine languages, which we will show to be typologically identical in many respects to noun phrase structures of some mainland SEA languages containing quantifiers.

We begin by reviewing the word order typology of SEA languages as it has been discussed in the literature, paying special attention to those constructions which do not conform to the expected typology. We then discuss the analysis of some of these constructions within lexicase, showing that the analysis forced upon us by the theory in fact reveals the languages to be typologically more consistent than previous analyses have implied.

It must be emphasized here that the objective of this paper is to divorce ourselves from a semantically based characterization of notions such as subject and object, as well as semantic definitions of lexical categories, and to confine ourselves to morphosyntactic characterizations. Word order typology is, after all, an attempt to characterize recurring patterns of a syntactic nature in language, and one can only expect to get meaningful results when the terms that are used are not based on the intuitions of native English speakers, but are carefully formulated within the constraints of a single grammatical theory.

Finally we suggest that the analyses provided here have implications for the historical reconstruction of earlier stages of the syntax of these languages.

2. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF WORD ORDER TYPOLOGY IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN LANGUAGES

The general characteristics of the word order typology of a number of languages in SEA were included in the often-cited, pioneering work of Greenberg (1966), in which he related the position of the verb (V) in relation to subject (S) and object (O) with other aspects of word order, drawing from this a number of supposed universals of word
order. Thai, Khmer, Vietnamese, and Malay were cited as examples of SVO languages which have prepositions and show NG (Noun-Genitive) and NA (Noun-Adjective) word orders. Tagabili and other Philippine languages were cited as examples of VSO languages which also have prepositions and NG word order, but which have the opposite order, AN, for noun phrases containing adjectives. Other features, such as the position of auxiliary verbs, relative clauses, and numerals, were also shown to be implied by the position of the verb in relation to the subject and object.

Subsequent work by Vennemann (1975, 1976), building on insights presented in Lehmann (1973), showed that what is relevant in determining the word order typology of a language was not the relative positions of subject, object, and verb per se, but the relative positions of operator in relation to operand, or attribute to head. In each of the languages cited above, the object follows the verb, putting them into the class of languages in which operators typically follow their operands. Thus in Thai, Khmer, and Indonesian (as shown in examples 1–12), head nouns are typically followed by demonstratives, adjectives, genitive constructions, and relative clauses, all of which modify in some sense the reference of their head noun and appear to be attributive to it. Philippine languages are also typically operand-operator languages, with heads preceding their modifiers.

**Thai**

1. บ้าน ว่าจั่ง  
   house big  
   ‘big house’

2. โรงเรียน นิวิ้ง  
   school this  
   ‘this school’

3. หนังสือ ขอทาน ผู้หญิง  
   book of me  
   ‘my book’

4. บ้าน ที่ผู้หญิง ชื่น ผุ้บุก  
   house that I build  
   ‘the house that I built’

**Khmer** (Jacob, 1968)

5. ปราท ทอม  
   house big  
   ‘big house’

6. ค้า นิวิ้ง  
   dog this  
   ‘this dog’

7. เรียน รีบ ทางนิวิ้ง  
   book of me  
   ‘my book’

8. นิวิ้ง คีล ซีห์ คีม่า  
   student who knows Khmer  
   ‘a student who knows Khmer’

**Indonesian** (MacDonald & Soenjono, 1967)

9. rumah besar  
   house big  
   ‘big house’

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1 Other linguists have also contributed to the discussion of word-order typology, including Comrie (1981) and Stampe and Donegan (1983).

2 All Khmer, Indonesian, and Burmese examples are given in the transcription of the sources.
10. buku ini
   book this
   ‘this book’
11. rumah saja
    house my
    ‘my house’
12. jang pergi
    the goes
    ‘the one who goes’

Burmese, on the other hand is an example of a SEA language with the opposite
typology. As a Sino-Tibetan language it is typically SOV, therefore in Vennemann’s
terms it is an example of an operator-operand language. Attributes such as adjectives,
determiners, numerals, genitive constructions, and relative clauses precede their head
nouns, as in examples 13–17.

Burmese (Cormyn, 1944)
13. kâundé lú
    good person
    ‘good person’
14. dî lúha
    this person
    ‘this person’
15. ńâ maní?
    five minute
    ‘five minutes’
16. dî châundêga yéihá
    this stream water
    ‘the water of this stream’
17. bamá mahouttè lú
    Burmese not-is person
    ‘a person who is not Burmese’

Hawkins (1983) provides a greatly expanded sample of languages and language
types in terms of their word order typologies, including information from some 357
languages, a large number of which are SEA languages. After providing an extensive
review of the contributions of Greenberg, Lehmann, and Vennemann to the discovery
of word order universals, Hawkins, like Vennemann, rejects the Greenbergian
characterization of the relative positions of S, V, and O as the main explanatory
principle of universal word order typologies, opting to follow Vennemann’s operator-
operand order as the major explanatory principle. Hawkins states, “The modifier-head
principle is claimed to be a valid cross-categorial generalization about language. Like all
major generalizations, it exemplifies a number of phenomena under a higher regularity:
The categories N, V, Adp [Adposition], and Adj are assigned the common status
‘head’ within their respective phrasal categories, and all other constituents within those
are assigned the status ‘modifiers of the head’” (1983, p. 292). Hawkins further
delineates and describes a number of other principles which he believes account for the
variety of word order types found universally.

It has long been recognized that simply by knowing the position of the object with
reference to the verb in a sentence, especially if the language is SVO, it is almost
impossible to predict with assurance the relative orders of other constituents in that
language. Many such languages have word order patterns that are apparently not
consistent with the operand-operator order implied by the position of the object
following the verb. SEA languages are no exception, as the data presented below will show.

Although both Thai and Khmer have structures containing a quantifier which seem to conform to the expected head-modifier (noun-numeral) order of these languages, as in examples 18–19, in other quantifier constructions in Thai, the numeral always precedes any classifier that specifies a quantified occurrence, time, distance, or measurement noun (examples 20–22). In this construction the apparent order, modifier-head, is contrary to the expected typology. However in other types of quantified noun phrase, the numeral-classifier sequence itself follows the quantified noun (examples 23–24), and is therefore in the appropriate position typologically.

**Thai**

18. bâan nîŋ³
   house one

   'a house'

**Khmer** (Sak-Humphrey, 1994)

19. trey pîi [dael c?oen nuh kgnom gnam haoey]
   fish two which cook those I eat already
   'Those two fish which are cooked, I ate already.'

**Thai**

20. sâam khráŋ
   three time
   'three times'

21. sâam thii
   three occurrence
   'three occurrences'

22. hâa méet
   five meter
   'five meters'

23. nãŋšïi sâam lêm
   book three clsf
   'three books'

24. mææw hôk tua
   cat six clsf
   'six cats'

Similarly, in Khmer, numerals precede classifiers in apparent violation of the predominant head-modifier order elsewhere in the language, as in examples 25–28, although, as in Thai, a quantified noun is followed by the numeral-classifier sequence (exs. 29-30), matching the expected typology.

**Khmer** (Sak-Humphrey, 1994)

25. pram lau
   five dozen
   'five dozen'

26. dap snet
   ten bunch
   'ten bunches'

³ That nîŋ in post-nominal position in Thai is not a numeral at all but an indefinite determiner is discussed in section 3 below.