

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 morpho-syntactic 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. Tagabali 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),¹ 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. bâan jàj
house big | 'big house' |
| 2. roonjriən níi
school this | 'this school' |
| 3. nǎŋsǎi khǒŋ phǒm
book of me | 'my book' |
| 4. bâan thǎi chǎn plùuk
house that I build | 'the house that I built' |

Khmer (Jacob, 1968)²

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------|
| 5. ¹ ptǎəh thom
house big | 'big house' |
| 6. ckae nih
dog this | 'this dog' |
| 7. siəwphiw rebah khnom
book of me | 'my book' |
| 8. seh dæl ceh khmae
student who knows Khmer | 'a student who knows Khmer' |

Indonesian (MacDonald & Soenjono, 1967)

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------|
| 9. rumah besar
house big | 'big house' |
|-----------------------------|-------------|

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 | 'this book' |
| book this | |
| 11. rumah saja | 'my house' |
| house my | |
| 12. jang pergi | 'the one who goes' |
| the 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 (Cornyn, 1944)

- | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 13. kâundé lú | 'good person' |
| good person | |
| 14. dí lúha | 'this person' |
| this person | |
| 15. ṇâ mani? | 'five minutes' |
| five minute | |
| 16. dí châundêga yéihá | 'the water of this stream' |
| this stream water | |
| 17. bamá mahouttè lú | 'a person who is not Burmese' |
| Burmese not-is person | |

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-categorical 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 nîŋ*³ 'a house'
house one

Khmer (Sak-Humphrey, 1994)

19. *trey pii* [*dael cʰoen nuh kgnom gnam haoey*]
fish two which cook those I eat already
'Those two fish which are cooked, I ate already.'

Thai

20. *săam khrán* 'three times'
three time
21. *săam thii* 'three occurrences'
three occurrence
22. *hâa méet* 'five meters'
five meter
23. *năŋsǐi sǎam lêm* 'three books'
book three clsf
24. *mææw hòk tua* 'six cats'
cat six clsf

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 bunches'
ten bunch

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.