SYNTACTIC RELATIONSHIP AREAS IN SOME LANGUAGES OF EUROPE, CENTRAL AND NORTH ASIA: A COMPARATIVE TYPOLOGICAL SKETCH

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The geographical region in question is covered by various languages of two superfamilies the Boreal sive Nostratic and the Palaeo-Euroasiatic sive Sino-Caucasian.

From the viewpoint of syntactic typology the Nostratic languages belong to the Nominative or Accusative type while the Sino-Caucasian languages often display features of the Ergative type.

Yet from an historical, diachronic viewpoint certain language families from the Boreal stock reveal their Ergative past. This may be exemplified by the Indo-European languages (Gamkrelidze, Ivanov 1984 and other sources).

The Sino-Caucasian idioms are justly considered to be predecessors of their evolutionally younger Boreal congeners (J. Kerns 1994 and other sources).’

Several major syntactic principles characterize the Nostratic languages continuum:

a) Modifier before its Head or A→B (left branching);

b) The SOV word order in the majority of the superfamily;

c) The dependent Genitive position in a phrase;

d) Measure of analytical and syntactic constructions;

e) Measure of parataxis vs hypotaxis in the sentence structure of a given language.

A handful of languages in the areas traditionally escape the hard-and-fast lines of the mainstream taxonomy. Far west we have the Basque which falls within the West Caucasian languages’ syntactical pattern of Head before Adjunct or B→A (Trombetti; 1925), that is attributive adjectives are postnominal there; the same thing is in the Eskimo idiom, Far NE Asia.

In the Far Eastern Ainu the word order is SOV (Batchelor 1905) as much as in the Uralo-Altaic and other East Nostratic languages.

On the border of Europe and Asia, in the Caucasus area all the vernacular languages tend to be SOV and to place the modifier before the head of grammatical structures (cf. Klimov, 1969: 40, 52). In the Tibeto-Burman language group of the Sinitic family the SOV sentence pattern is also observed as in the Tanghut language, for instance.

The sentence word order regarded diachronically is also known to be changeable. Many Indo-European languages at present feature the SVO pattern (Slavonic, Germanic, etc.) but the PIE was predominantly SOV (Lehmann 1972). “Though English is now a VO language, it still retains some features reminiscent of prehistoric SOV origin” (Kerns, op.cit.: 162).

In the Afroasiatic stock one can also come across relics of the earlier SOV syntax (Kerns, op.cit.: 168).

In the Syntax of the phrase not a few languages of the areas analyzed are noted for frequent use of the so-called Serial verbs. Take Bengali ura ‘fly’ with the ure utha ‘to take to wing’ i.e. ‘to soar flying’. There a great similarity in employing such verbs in the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages, on the one hand, and in Turkic and Tajik, on the other. In this respect the Dravidian sentence structure is congruent since the law Rectum ante regens is observed in the idioms of the Dravidian area which historically had been located close to Central Asia.

Another peculiar syntactic feature of the discussed languages is frequent use of the so-called Echo-words or twin(ned) words of the type seen in Georgian are mare ‘here and there’, Turkish et met ‘meat and flesh’ and so on (Trombetti 1923: 619).

In many a language of the Boreal and Sino-Caucasian macrofamilies the relative Subordinate clauses are employed with no relative pronouns or any relational words in general. Specimens of this particular syntactic phenomenon can be cited from as diverse languages as Turkic and North East Caucasian like Chechen, etc. (Desheriev 1959: 272)

Such is a brief sketch of the syntactic relationship areas in certain language families and idioms of Europe, Central and Northern Asia (for more see such sources as Kozinski 1995: 130–132, as well as Kibrik 1993, Comrie 2000 and so forth).
REFERENCES

TROMBETTI, A. 1923 Elementi di glottologia II Bologna.