ON CONSTRAINTS AND AMBIGUITIES IN COMPLEX SENTENCE STRUCTURES

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This paper deals with constraints in complex sentence structures occurring in embedding, person marking, gapping, and omission of noun phrases in Finnish, Udmurt, and Malagasy. The topics will be investigated in particular with respect to the major syntactic constituents: (S)ubjects, (O)bjects, and predicates (V). We ask how these constraints are reflected in the basic word order model, which in Finnish (and in English) is SVO, in Udmurt SOV, and Malagasy VOS. In Finnish, the order of the major syntactic constituents may be changed for pragmatic reasons, and in Udmurt, in addition to the SOV order, the SVO order is also common. In addition to conjunctions, Finnish and Udmurt have a large number of non-finite verbal forms which are used in complex sentence structures. Malagasy in particular has a large number of conjunctions, and various passive constructions are used in organizing the thematic structure of sentences.

In spite of the fact that the word order is relatively free in Finnish, the order is strict in some subordinate structures containing nominal forms of verbs. In example (1.a), the second argument of the finite predicate is a phrase whose head is a participle. The word order in the phrase is fixed and the reverse order is ungrammatical (1.b)). The constraints in examples (1.c) and (1.d) concern the status of the embedded constituent containing a participle form: the whole constituent cannot be topicalized.

(1.a) Pekka ihaile+e [[Suome+sta Ruotsi+in]
    Pekka admire+PRES.3SG Finland+ELA Sweden+ILL
    muutta+va+a]. [1, p. 282].
    moving(-person)+PCPL.PRES+PTV
    ‘Pekka admires a person who moves from Finland to Sweden.’

(1.b) *Pekka ihailee [muuttavaa [Suomesta Ruotsiin]].

(1.c) Tiedottee+ssa [kaikk+i+en] [toivo+ta+an] psyvy+vää+n
    notice+INE all+PL+GEN wish+PASS+PERS stay+PCPL.PRES+GEN
    paiko+i+lla+an]. [2, p. 358]
    place+PL+ADE+POSS.3PL
    ‘In the notice, all are asked to stay where they are.’

(1.d) *[Kaikkien psyvyvän paikoillaan toivotaan] tiedotteessa.

The following examples describe the relationships in omission of noun phrases and gapping. In the Malagasy example (3), the first sentence is a nominal sentence, and the second sentence has the word order VOS. The grammatical subject of the third sentence is not overt, neither is the predicate of the embedded clause. Although the subject of the third sentence is omitted, the structure is not ambiguous, because the tense marking binds the combined sentences [3].

(3) S1[Vehivavy malemy fanahy] sy S2[tia fihavanana aman’ olona izy]
    woman gentle spirit and v.R.love relationship with people she
    ary S3[n+a+hita fianarana ambonimbony kokoa noho ny lahy].
    and PAST+ACT+see studies high COMP than DET man
    ‘The woman had a gentle spirit, and she liked to have relations with people, and
    (she) understood higher studies better than the man (understood).’

The dominant word order in Malagasy is VOS, and it is expected that the NP of the first coordinate can be omitted, but in practice, the arguments of the second coordinates can also be deleted [3], [4, p. 130]. In Malagasy, structural ambiguities may occur, if there is no overt cover category. In
Udmurt, the coordinative converb carries information on the tense and person marking of the predicate in the finite form (example (4)). The gerund can also be located after the finite verb. This order is not accepted in Chuvash. The importance of tense marking as a binding operator can be seen in gapping: in coordination, the predicate cannot be omitted precisely when the tenses of the coordinated verb phrases are different (example (5) (Finnish)):

(4) so Udmurt+jos+yz --- og-až’e l’uka+sa so+os+ly
  s/he Udmurt+PL+ACC --- together gather+CONV they+ALL
  [veraloz vylem] vōś kar+ny kos+sa [5, p. 216]
  [speak have]+HIST-IMPF-PAST.3SG sacrifice make+INF+order+CONV
  ‘S/he had gathered Udmurt people together and had spoken to them and had asked
  them to prepare a sacrifice.’

(5) *Lu+i+n eilen Puškin+in runo+j+a ja huomenna Heine+n.
  read+PAST+1SG yesterday Puškin+GEN poem+PL+PTV and tomorrow Heine+GEN
  *‘I read yesterday Puškin’s poems and tomorrow Heine’s.’

Possible ambiguities in the cross-reference relationships in complex sentence structures in Udmurt and Finnish occur in particular when the arguments of the finite and non-finite predicates in the third person singular and plural can potentially refer to several entities.

The goal of this work is to investigate the processes and reasons giving rise to constraints and ambiguities in complex sentence structures. A practical goal is to work towards developing a system that can be used in encoding a typological data base consisting of running texts so that it displays the variety in expressing complex sentence structures. This variety cannot be captured when coordination and subordination are investigated paying attention only to the basic methods used in forming complex sentence structure.

Abbreviations: 3 = 3rd person, ACC = accusative, ACT = active, ADE = adessive, ALL = allative, COMP = complementizer, CONV = converb, DET = determiner, ELA = elative, GEN = genitive, HIST-IMPF-PAST = historical imperfective past, ILL = illative, INE = inessive, O = object, INF = infinitive, NP = noun phrase, PASS = passive, PAST = past, PCPL = participle, PERS = person, PL = plural, POSS = possessive suffix, PRES = present, PTV = partitive, R = verbal root, REFL = reflexive, S = sentence, SG = singular, V = verb, predicate.

REFERENCES