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Comparing Word Orders in Simple Transitive Clauses in Three Asian Sign Languages

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies on constituent orders in American Sign Language suggest that the basic constituent order of a simple clause may be altered by semantic factors such as the reversibility of the subject and object referents (Fischer 1974, 1975), morphological factors such as the presence of verb agreement (Kegl 1976, 1977) and the use of an object classifier in the predicate (Liddell 1980), as well as syntactic operations such as topicalization of the grammatical object (Fischer 1974, Padden 1988). Subsequent studies on other sign languages (e.g. Volterra et al. 1984, Johnston et al. 2007) typically look at some, rather than all of the above-mentioned factors. Hence, typologically, it remains unclear whether these factors are valid and of equal importance in accounting for word order phenomena across other sign languages.

This paper attempts to find out the basic constituent order of HKSL, JakSL and SLSL, and investigates whether and to what extent the above-mentioned factors may alter the basic orders. Data of these three sign languages mainly come from spontaneous production as well as elicited sentences by native or near-native signers. The data collected so far suggest that while SVO is the predominant order in HKSL and JakSL, SOV is strongly favoured in SLSL. In addition to that, HKSL, JakSL and SLSL also differ in the extent to which variant orders are permissible. For instance, semantic reversibility of subject and object appears to be more influential in allowing word order variation in HKSL and JakSL, than in SLSL. Moreover, SVO (the default order), SOV and OSV are permissible in the presence of verb agreement in HKSL and JakSL. In SLSL, however, despite the fact that similar verb agreement morphology can indicate clearly who does what to whom, SOV is still strongly preferred, and SLSL signers accept an OSV sequence only if O is marked distinctly by a brow raise and is prosodically separated from the rest of the sentence. Use of classifiers also plays a more important role in the word order changes in HKSL and JakSL than in SLSL. On top of that, differences across verb types and among individuals are also observed. The findings of this study suggest that sign languages are in fact far more diverse than are generally assumed, and more research is definitely needed to reveal how constituent order patterns resemble or differ typologically across sign languages.

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