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Abstract

Word Order in Inuit Sign Language: Issues and Challenges

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Basic word order may well be the most common property according to which a spoken language is typologically classified. To determine basic word order in a language, linguists take into account which is the most frequent occurring word order, the one that is least marked, and the one that is pragmatically most neutral (Whaley 1997). The two most frequently found basic word orders are Subject-Verb-Object (SVO), and Subject-Object-Verb (SOV).

For a number of sign languages, a basic word order has been suggested, too. From the available studies, we can infer that the two basic orders that are most frequently attested in spoken languages are also the most frequent ones in sign languages. Since the 1970s and 1980s, the possibility of studying word order in sign languages has been debated in many publications, however. Brennan (1994) argues that the study of word order is a complex matter because sign language syntax is simultaneous, iconic, and often pragmatically organized. Establishing basic order is further complicated by the fact that alternative orders frequently occur as a result of operations such as, for example, topicalisation and pronoun copy.

In addition, the criteria that have been established to determine basic word order in spoken languages are not easily applied to sign languages. The first criterion, the most frequent order of a verb, its subject, and its object, tends to be problematic in sign languages. For one thing, sentences with an overt subject and an overt object are quite rare in sign language discourse, as Nadeau (1993) points out for Quebec Sign Language.

In this paper, I will discuss the issues of establishing basic word order in a sign language, and I will describe the challenges encountered during the elicitation of sentences in Inuit Sign Language.