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INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL for

GERMANIC LINGUISTICS
and
SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

VOLUME 21, NUMBER 2

FALL 2016

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Behaghel's Laws and the Word Order Principles Revisited

ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the relationships of syntactico-semantic structures and pragmatic functions in morphologically case-marked languages such as German and Korean, as opposed to English where configurationality and linear order jointly regulate the grammar. After critically evaluating some previous approaches (Vennemann 1974, 1984; Hawkins. 1986, 1994; Müller-Gotama 1994), we suggest that the grammatical properties of a given language can be identified along a continuum scalar model of a subject and topic prominence parameter. By this typological parameter, we propose that grammatical properties of languages, i.e., scrambling, passives, raising and extraction structures, are coded with different motivations at both ends of the polarity. Furthermore we argue that the semantic and syntactic content of the grammatical relations is strongly correlated with the relative ordering of topic and focus positions. Finally we reinterpret Behaghel's Laws.

1. Introduction: Three Behaghel's Laws

In the early part of the twentieth century Behaghel (1932:4-9) proposed the following three general laws on German word order [English translations are due to Vennemann 1974:339].

- (1) "Das oberste Gesetz ist dieses, dass das geistig eng Zusammengehörige auch eng zusammengestellt wird." (ibid.:4): The most important law is that what belongs together mentally [semantically] is placed close together [syntactically].
- (2) "Es stehen die das Vorhergehende aufnehmenden Satzglieder vor den nichtaufnehmenden, d.h. es stehen die alten Begriffe vor den neuen."

(ibid.:4): Sentence elements that take up preceding material stand before those that don't, i.e., the old concepts precede the new ones.

- (3) "Ein drittes Gesetz fordert, dass das unterscheidende Glied dem unterschiedenen vorausgeht." (ibid.:5): A third law demands that the differentiating element precede the differentiated one.

The first law speaks to the relationship of the semantic representation and the syntactic component of a given language. At first sight, this law seems to be cross-linguistically universal when we witness the juxtaposed constituents such as 'genitive modifier + head noun' (*anti-drug group's survey*) or 'adverb + adjective' (*exceptionally intelligent*). Vennemann (1974:339) in his seminal article on Germanic word order change also states that this first law is "a principle governing the relationship between semantics and syntax in all languages". He further elaborates that if 'modifier' and 'head' constitute "a function-argument relationship in the semantic representation of a sentence" and if the two elements are 'the lexical realization' of the given function-argument relationship in that sentence, then "the two elements appear, in the natural case, juxtaposed rather than at a distance in that sentence". This clearly evokes the early principle of Generative Grammar which stipulated that every phrase in every language has the same elements including a Head: e.g., the syntactic constituency structures of NP, VP and PP (cf. Sportiche et al. 2014:48).

The second law is a principle regulating the relationship between pragmatics and word order, more precisely theme-rheme organization of sentence elements. As to this law, Vennemann (1974:340) states that "this principle is reflected in the fact that languages in which the subject—the preferred case to refer to a topic—opens the sentence are by far the dominant class" (i.e., SVO and SOV).

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Behaghel's third law seems to be simply wrong and contradictory even within one language, since we have 'head + modifier' constructions in German (*die Frau, die ich gestern auf dem Markt gesehen habe; das Spielzeug meines Kindes*). However, in an effort to give a more precise account of diachronic and synchronic word order regularities.

Vennemann came up with a unique word order principle, 'the principle of natural serialization' by incorporating the first law and the third law coupled with the formulas of a properly extended predicate logic of Bartsch (1972). Thus, the third law can now be interpreted such that strict head-final (verb-final) languages conform to the 'modifier + head' serialization, whereas the prototypical head-initial (verb first) languages obey the serialization of 'head + modifier'. Finally, the word order principle of Vennemann can be interpreted as an attempt to explain the synchronic and diachronic adjacency regularities of the different word classes across languages (cf. also Strömsdörfer & Vennemann 1995).

2. Behaghel's First Law

Vennemann claims that SOV is universally the "most natural" basic word order, but that a shift to SVO may be brought about by a need to avoid ambiguity with the erosion of case endings. Since in an SOV language that has lost its inflectional endings, a topicalization strategy that shifts the topicalized nominal to the front of the sentence would result in a sentence superficially indistinguishable from an unmarked structure with the grammatical roles reserved. The SVO word order arises due to the pressure to avoid such ambiguity (cf. Vennemann 1993). When the grammatical roles are reversed, there would be two nominals preceding the verb with no formal mechanism distinguishing the grammatical roles. Other VO-harmonic head-initial structures subsequently arise as predicted by the "principle of natural serialization". Further, the language may revert to the most "natural" verb-final word order if sufficiently rich inflectional morphology redevelops (Vennemann 1974:371). This observation needs further typological qualifications when it comes to the discussions of crucial probability criteria such as stability and frequency of diachrony (Strömsdörfer & Vennemann 1995:1130). The claims of Vennemann (1974) have subsequently been challenged by numerous inductive analyses, including Li and Thompson (1974), Harris (1984), and Disterheft (1987), all of whom cite cases of change from SOV that fails to be triggered by any loss of case inflection. Hock (2010) also mentions Hindi as a language that has undergone inflectional reduction, but has remained SOV.

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Despite the differences in the order of verbal specifiers, we realize that a completely different view surfaces with respect to Behaghel's first law, when we investigate the overall grammatical structures of English and German outside the middle field. I regard this law as an interpretation of the interface of syntax and semantics, contrary to the previous proposals made by Vennemann (1984) and Hawkins (1994).

- (5) a. Hans happened to be ill. (S-S Raising: syntactic subject \neq semantic subject)
b. *Hans geschah krank zu sein.
c. It happened that Hans was ill.
d. Es geschah, dass Hans krank war.
- (6) a. Philosophy is boring to study. (O-S Raising: syntactic subject = semantic object)
b. *Philosophie ist langweilig zu studieren.
c. It is boring to study philosophy.
d. Es ist langweilig, Philosophie zu studieren.
- (7) a. I believe her to have murdered the mayor. (S-O Raising)
b. *Ich glaube sie den Bürgermeister ermordet zu haben
c. I believe that she has murdered the mayor.
d. Ich glaube, dass sie den Bürgermeister ermordet hat.
- (8) a. This bed was slept in. (adposition stranding)
b. In diesem Bett wurde geschlafen.
- (9) a. What did you assume that we would not __ bring? (WH-extraction)
b. *Was hast du angenommen, dass wir nicht mitbringen würden?
- (10) a. It is she who is making the noise. (extraposition with emphasis)
b. *Sie* macht den Lärm.

- (11) a. It was his car in which we went there.
b. It was in his car (that) we went there. (Satzspaltung, cleft-construction)
c. Es war sein Wagen, in dem wir dorthinfuhren.
d. ??Es war in seinem Wagen, dass wir dorthinfuhren. (Anderson 1993)
- (12) a. It's only 5 weeks so far, that he is in Bonn. (*it*-cleft construction)
b. Er ist erst 5 Wochen in Bonn. (focus-particle construction)

The English and German constructions in (5-12) suggest that in the structural application of the syntactic rules such as raising, wh-extraction, adposition stranding, extraposition and bi-clausal cleft-construction, English finds greater freedom than German (cf. Hawkins 1986, Anderson 1993).

This observation implies that the overall structures of English violate Behaghel's first law in (1) more so than those of German. If we understand the English 'raising to subject' constructions given in (5) and (6) as 'grammatical relation changing rules' creating 'syntactic subjects' in the history of English, they can be interpreted as the 'topic – comment' structures in which a noun phrase in the pre-verbal topic slot appears as the surface clausal subject, but is not the semantic subject of the mono-clausal construction. This would lead us towards an understanding of subjects as discourse-based entities that depart from any strict determination in terms of semantic categories such as 'actor' or 'agent'. The English construction (7a) represents a 'subject to object raising' in which the syntactic and logical subject of the second clause in (7c) is raised to object in the mono-clause. In the original bi-clausal constructions in (5) and (7) we note that syntactic subjects in the subordinate clauses contract semantic relations with the verbs of the hypotaxis. The English construction (6c) shows that 'philosophy' is functioning as the logical object of 'to study'. The 'grammatical relation changing rules' in English seem to be also related to semantic characterizations of the subject category.

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According to Plank (1983:5), the broader structural description of the rule with looser selectional restrictions for many English verbs seems to be related to the greater 'opacity' of English in which semantic roles are neutralized in the subject category far more than in a morphologically transparent language like German, where unlike English, tighter selectional restrictions are imposed on the verbal valency of German (cf. also Hawkins 1986: The door opened (with a key)/Die Tür öffnete *(sich); A key opened the door/*Ein Schlüssel öffnete die Tür; This tent sleeps two/*Dieses Zelt schläft zwei).

Assuming that German is not a consistent OV language, then in a strict SOV language like Korean, where the transparency principle wins out over the functionalism à la Plank, we expect by analogy that raising structures, passivization, (Wh-) extractions, extrapositions and clefts are non-existent (cf. 5-12) or much more restricted than in German, due to freer word order made possible by the richer material case-marking system (cf. also 'Diese Uhr hat er mir zu Weihnachten geschenkt' vs 'This is the watch he gave me for Christmas'). Furthermore, an SOV type language like Korean does not allow the subject category to have anything but formal characterization involving 'extraposition' or 'it-cleft', since it does not have expletives like 'it', 'es' or 'there'.

This means that a Korean type language is the language which conforms more to Behaghel's first law. In the next section, which deals with Behaghel's second law, we will investigate how the word order freedom can be pragmatically constrained with respect to the three languages.

3. Behaghel's Second Law

We have already stated in section 1 that Behaghel's second law has to do with an 'information packaging principle' such as 'topic-comment structure'. In previous research (cf. Hawkins 1986; Müller-Gotama 1994), it was pointed out that a grammatically prescribed fixed word order language like English shows more ambiguous surface syntax with respect to the pragmatic functions compared to German and the Slavic languages.

In these approaches, however, the traditional notions of subject and object still play a central role in interpreting the core cases of grammatical organization (cf. also Hawkins 1994 for a structural approach). In my previous writings I critically evaluated this research tradition and added that for a more adequate description of the typological regularities, we need to set the notion of 'topic' apart from the category of 'subject' (cf. Seong 1999, 2001). Chafe (1976:43) also cautions that the cognitive role of surface subject category has been confounded, in the course of a language's history, with other roles, to the point where "that surface subject status is not associated consistently with a single cognitive status". Gundel (1988) in her elegant study also illustrates what kinds of strategies are available to mark 'topic—comment structures' across languages, following the tradition of Li and Thompson (1976). Sasse (1995) also critically evaluates the prominence typology and underscores the evolutionary research tradition which leads to the establishment of the focus-prominence and configurationality á la Kiss (1987).

However, neither Gundel nor Sasse shows how the relative degree of topic—comment structure can vary among the languages investigated, when it comes to discourse situations. In this section, we want to further investigate how the word orders of English, German and Korean are pragmatically regulated in controlled dialogue situations.

(13) English (Chafe 1976:48)

Q: What happened to the lamp?

A1: The dog knocked it over.

A2: ?It was knocked over by the dog.

In the sentences in (13-15) I provided a controlled dialogue situation whereby various answers (A) to the question (Q) ‘what happened to the lamp?’ can be formulated for the three languages in the order of preference. In the English Q & A pair (13), we observe that while *it* is the topic, *the dog* is chosen here as subject. In the German Q & A pair (14) as well, we find that *der Hund* is selected as the subject over the topical pronouns *die* or *sie*. Between English and German, we also note another difference that the passivization as a topicalization strategy can be a more plausible alternative in English than in German. In the Korean Q & A pair, the most preferred unmarked answer (15A1) to the question (15Q) shows that the topical pronominal constituent with *mun* appearing in the sentence initial position precedes the pre-verbally focused rhematic element *dog*. This topical item can be freely dropped in the most natural discourse setting. It seems in Korean that even though the constituent with subject marker *ka* appears as the sentential subject, its position is *not syntactico-semantically* but *pragmatically* determined (see also Shannon 1999 for Early New High German data on this issue). This topic-focus constraint also applies to the precedence rule ordering of dative, accusative and oblique arguments as I crucially demonstrated in my previous article on word order in German and Korean (cf. Seong 1999). This finding also suggests that the passivization strategy is highly restricted in Korean even in active clauses high in transitivity.

Now, if we focus on these Q & A pairs alone, in all three languages ‘topic’ and ‘agent’ fail to converge on the subject in the active transitive clause. Of course, if an intransitive construction such as ‘*It just fell off the table*’ is selected as an answer to the question (13Q) ‘*what happened to the lamp?*’, then subject and topic will converge in all three languages and the subject in Korean in topic position will be dropped naturally, leaving the preverbal elements focused. Van Oosten (1984) already observes that agency, or, more generally, “primaryhood” often wins out over topichood in English in subject-selection in basic, active sentences. It is in this sense

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that Bates and MacWhinney (1982:204) claim that, "when the overlap [of agent and topic] does break down, agency is more likely to dominate in assignment of subjectivization". Even though German also seems to conform to this principle in basic sentences, the passivization in which topichood prevails over agency in English subject-selection does not strictly apply to German, due to the existence of verb-second rule as we have witnessed.

In this respect we need to further clarify the notion of topic in a cross-linguistic context. . The research by Chafe (1976, 1998) on the category of 'topic' seems to be a good starting point in order to understand the relationship between subject and topic. While Chafe (1976) endorses the traditional rough characterization of subjecthood in terms of "what we are talking about," or that "starting point" with respect to which we add communicated knowledge, or a "hitching post for new knowledge" (ibid. 43-44), his discussion of topics in English is limited to an explanation of why so-called "topicalization" structures such as *As for the play...* and *John I like* actually involve foci of contrast rather than topics; the implication of the discussion of topics by Chafe actually seems to be that "topic" is a category of questionable relevance to Modern English. In connection with Chinese, Chafe provides his oft-quoted definition of topic as something which "limit[s] the applicability of the main predication to a certain restricted domain," or as something which "sets a spatial, temporal, or individual framework within which the main predication holds" (ibid. 50). Thus, according to Chafe, "real" topics "are not so much 'what the sentence is about' as 'the frame within which the sentence holds'" (ibid. 51).

Given this definition of topic (intended to characterize a structure in "topic-prominent" languages like Chinese), it isn't quite true to say that Modern English lacks topics, just that the structure Modern English employs to code topics is much more limited in use and restricts what may be treated as topics in other languages including German and Dutch. For example, apart from nominative subject arguments occupying the prefield position (Ger. *Vorfeld*) in German declarative sentences, we also find quite often local or temporal (scene) setting adverbials in the German prefield position which determine the domain of the main predication as in (16).

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(19)

gu pasta-nun nae-ka imi mok-ess-jiman ajikdo
namaissta.

The pasta - top. I - nom already eat-pret-but still (subj)
left-is

'Even though I already ate of the pasta, there is still (some) left'

This tells us that in Korean the zero NP-anaphor is not syntactically restricted. In the Korean system, then we can state that the structural properties accrued to the category of 'subject' in extreme subject-prominent languages like English are distributed over multiple separate functional roles, i.e., topic and subject. If this is the case, then we are justified in arguing that the structural topic properties mostly associated with the English subject category, i.e., grammatical relation changing rules such as passivization and raising, are highly restricted or not available at all in Korean. Thus, the mechanism of subject and topic selection in English and German in the context of Van Oosten (1984) vanishes entirely as far as Korean is concerned. Based on the Korean examples in (15, 17, 18, 19), we can also predict that in subject- and topic-prominent languages such as Korean and Japanese, the pronominalization process coupled with subjectivization found in Indo-European languages is not expected to occur. Based upon the discussions of pragmatics in this section, we conclude that English deviates from the theme-rheme principle of discourse organization in some core cases of the grammar more than German does and that the discourse-configurational topic and focus positions are built into Korean grammar as a typical SOV type language.

4. Behaghel's Third Law

As far as Behaghel's third law is concerned, I consider this principle along with his *Gesetz der wachsenden Glieder* to be a default principle of more general word order typology involving 'VO- and OV types' (cf. Behaghel 1932:6).¹ Thus, according to Dryer (1995:1052), the object patterners (genitive, noun phrase, adverb ...) more often precede verb patterners (noun, adposition, verb ...) in OV languages, while they more often follow in VO languages. If this is the case, then we can argue that Behaghel's three laws are closely correlated with the general word order typology.

On the other hand, Hawkins (1994:119) states that the *Gesetz der wachsenden Glieder* and the first law (*das oberste Gesetz*) both reduce to EIC (Early Immediate Constituent). EIC predicts that one can recognize the VP domain in a sentence well in advance, if immediate constituents (ICs) like V, NP, PP are more rapidly identified in the sentence. For example, a Heavy-NP intervenes between V and PP, the access to the third IC, namely PP can be delayed (Hawkins 1994:57). Thus, parser prefers an early identification of the Constituent Recognition Domain (CRD) in Hawkins' terms.² Likewise, a third principle, the given-before-new principle ("es stehen die alten Begriffe vor den neuen," Behaghel 1932:4) can be subsumed under EIC, because the pragmatic effects of this principle will be derived as secondary consequences from EIC (cf. Hawkins 1994. chap. 4.4). Thus, three of Behaghel's laws are argued to be reduced to one.

However, Hawkins does not seem to provide any clear explanations as to how the cross-linguistic differences of syntax-semantics interface observed in (5-12) in the adjacency principle can be explained unitarily within the *oberste Gesetz*. Nor does his EIC principle offer any reasonable answers as to why the relative degree of topic—comment structure can vary among the languages investigated in (13-15), when it comes to the third principle of Behaghel.

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In section 2 dealing with Behaghel's first law, we confirmed that the semantic representation is closely correlated with the syntactic treatment of a given language. Our additional reasoning is that in a language like English, where word order is strictly fixed and thus the grammatical relations are regulated by the configurational constituency structure and linear word order, we expect productive clause-external syntactic movements to develop in order to achieve the corresponding pragmatic functions. On the other hand, in free word order languages these functions are directly fulfilled by strategies utilizing the means of material case marking systems. Therefore, we expect that in these languages, the grammatical relation changing constructions and clause-external syntactic movements are not likely to develop. In section 3 in which we discussed Behaghel's second law, we investigated how this law applies to English, German, and Korean in a pragmatically controlled situation. In SVO systems like English, the verb alone can serve as a functional boundary between the discourse categories of 'topic' and 'comment'. Therefore, the subject category can be functionally equated with 'topic. In other words, the subject can be preferably reanalyzed as *grammaticalized topic*. This is also what happened in the history of English. Instead, in an X₁VY system like German, this rule is rather loosened due to the verb second rule along with the existence of dative argument (e.g. **Glänzende Premiere gelingt Euro vs. Euro gelingt Glänzende Premiere*). Thus, *prefield* is reserved for 'topic', whereas the most preferred unmarked position for the sentential focus will be late in the middle field, assuming that some syntactic weight principle like Wackernagel's Law is operated in German.

In a strict SOV system like Korean, on the other hand, we see that the functional boundary between the discourse categories of topic and comment [focus] is structurally built into grammar by the presence of the topic-marker in the sentence-initial position (cf. also Gundel 1988).

5. Conclusion

Based on the above discussions we can then conclude that a consistent and strict SOV type language like Korean conforms to Behaghel's three laws optimally. Given this observation, we want to invoke Vennemann's earlier statement again (Vennemann 1974:339).

"These three 'laws', of which it is not entirely clear whether Behaghel thought of them as universal laws of language structure or as laws governing only the structure of German during its long reconstructable history, are in my opinion a very *heterogeneous* [my emphasis] character."

I propose that this statement be seriously reevaluated based upon the findings of this paper. As shown in the reinterpretation of Behaghel's Laws in the table (20), we conclude that these three laws co-vary with one another in language after language. That is, we demonstrated at least that Behaghel's Laws converge with one another as we move from VO languages to OV ones.

(20) Reinterpretation of Behaghel's Laws

	English(VO) subject = grammaticalized topic	German (not strict OV) subject \approx topic \approx positionally distinctive	Korean (strict OV): subject \neq topic structurally different
Scrambling (Linksversetzung)	no	yes +	yes ++
Passivization	very productive	less productive	highly restricted
Wh-movement (obligatory extraction)	yes	restricted	no
Cleft-construction Satzspaltung	yes	no	no
S – S Raising	yes	highly restricted	no
S – O Raising	yes	no	no
O – S Raising	yes	restricted	no
adposition stranding	yes	no	no
Semantic transparency of GR (subject and object)	low	high	highest
theme-rheme organization (Behaghel's 2 nd Law)	low	high	highest

NOTES

1. This law states that a short constituent precedes a longer and heavier one in a given sentence.
2. Cf. Hawkins 1994:58-59.

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