

Correlation between word order and intonation in two verb-initial Formosan languages

This research compares word order patterns in two Austronesian languages in Taiwan, Puyuma and Seediq. Both are VOS languages, but word order variation patterns differ strikingly. The word order data analysed is derived from three separate contexts, one where the whole content of the proposition is new, one where the object is new, and one where the subject is new, while the remainder of the proposition is given. The data is based on 4 speakers each of Puyuma and Seediq, of ages varying from 45 to 75, both male and female.

We found that word order variation is used to convey information structure in both languages. However, word order variations differ systematically between the two languages and we find some correlations between these differences and functions in intonation in these languages. We further note that the intonation systems of these non-tonal minority languages seem to be robust and have not undergone any noticeable influence from the dominating languages (Taiwanese and Mandarin). The variation patterns are as follows:

| | Puyuma | Seediq |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|
| intonation all new | H V O S | H H S V O |
| intonation OBJ focused | L H S _{Top} V O | H V O S |
| intonation SUBJ focused | H H S V O | H S V O |

Thus, at first sight word order patterns in Puyuma appear to be diametrically opposed. However, when the subject is focused, both languages make use of SVO ordering being a direct realization of a NEW-GIVEN pattern. Our material suggests that the underlying word order pattern in both languages is NEW-GIVEN (a pattern which we hypothesize may correlate typologically with V-initial order, as opposed to GIVEN-NEW for S-initial order). This is expanded by a further TOPIC-COMMENT level. We propose that the surface differences between Puyuma and Seediq correlate with a difference in the intonational properties of the languages.

Seediq uses a high pitch accent to mark focus, and broad focus is marked by accent on both subject and object. When subject is in focus it gets a high pitch accent and the rest is deaccented. Puyuma obligatorily marks the status of the subject as “non-topic” by a high pitch accent and as “topic” by a low pitch accent. End of utterance is also marked by a high pitch accent. Puyuma has thus intonational mechanisms which allow a clause-final S to be marked as new. In contrast, Seediq allows focus to be expressed intonationally, making VOS the natural in-situ option for a focused object, while Puyuma, which does not harness intonation for focusing, instead focuses an object by topicalizing the subject to preverbal position, leaving the object in the focused final position.

Thus, although intonation can be used alone to focus in Seediq, word order is still used to convey information structure. However, for the same condition (all new, OBJ focused or SUBJ focused) we found more word order variation in Seediq than in Puyuma, which may be explained by the focusing function of Seediq intonation.