Kids and Structure: What Young Learners Know about Word Order in English

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Presentation outline

• Word order in Croatian
• Word order in English
• Cross-linguistic influence
• Teaching grammar to YL
• Research
• Implications
Word order in Croatian (1)

- Word order:
  "the order in which elements occur in a clause or sentence"

- Word order in Croatian:
  - "rather liberal", a matter of style

- Declarative clauses:
  - unmarked > SVO
  - or marked > SOV, VSO, VOS, OSV, OVS
Word order in Croatian (2)

- Example 1

**SVO** Maja voli cvijeće. (Maja likes flowers.)

**SOV** Maja cvijeće voli. (*Maja flowers likes.*)

**VSO** Voli Maja cvijeće. (*Likes Maja flowers.*)

**VOS** Voli cvijeće Maja. (*Likes flowers Maja.*)

**OSV** Cvijeće Maja voli. (*Flowers Maja likes.*)

**OVS** Cvijeće voli Maja. (*Flowers likes Maja.*)
Word order in Croatian (3)

- Example 2
  Moja sestra ponekad bere crveno cvijeće.
  (My sister sometimes picks red flowers.)

In English, it is also possible to say:
2) Sometimes, my sister picks red flowers.
3) My sister picks red flowers sometimes.

In Croatian, there are numerous possible sentences...
Moja sestra ponekad bere crveno cvijeće. Ponekad moja sestra bere cvijeće crveno.
Moja sestra bere ponekad crveno cvijeće. Ponekad moja sestra crveno cvijeće bere.
Moja sestra bere ponekad cvijeće crveno. Ponekad bere moja sestra crveno cvijeće.
Moja sestra ponekad crveno cvijeće bere. Ponekad bere moja sestra crveno cvijeće.
Moja sestra bere ponekad cvijeće crveno bere. Ponekad bere moja sestra crveno cvijeće.
Moja sestra crveno cvijeće ponekad bere. Ponekad bere sestra moja crveno cvijeće.
Moja sestra cvijeće crveno ponekad bere. Ponekad bere crveno cvijeće sestra moja.
Moja sestra cvijeće crveno bere ponekad. Ponekad bere cvijeće crveno sestra moja.
Moja sestra cvijeće crveno bere ponekad. Ponekad bere cvijeće crveno sestra moja.
Sestra moja ponekad bere crveno cvijeće. Ponekad crveno cvijeće bere moja sestra.
Sestra moja bere ponekad crveno cvijeće. Ponekad crveno cvijeće bere moja sestra.
Sestra moja bere ponekad cvijeće crveno. Ponekad cvijeće crveno bere moja sestra.
Sestra moja ponekad crveno cvijeće bere. Ponekad cvijeće crveno bere sestra moja.
Ponekad moja sestra bere crveno cvijeće. Ponekad crveno cvijeće moja sestra bere.

...
Word order in Croatian (5)

- Why is word order in Croatian so “liberal”?
- Croatian is a synthetic language
  - words are inflected
  - word order in Croatian has a pragmatic function - it is not a “syntactic mess”, it is a matter of context and style
Word order in English (1)

- English is “a fixed word order language”

- the more peripheral an element is, the more freedom of position it has

- Declarative clauses:
  - unmarked > SVO
  - marked > OSV
Word order in English (2)

- Example

**S V O**

Luka loves football.

**O S V**

Football she loves, it’s cheering she can’t stand.
Was it always so?

- Old English had inflections
- “a fixed word order is a consequence of the giving up of many flexional endings”
Word order in English (4)

- English: a GWO language
  - a grammatical word order language

- word order gives us the key to the right understanding:
  - Heathcliff kissed Cathy.
  - Cathy kissed Heathcliff.
Word order in English (5)

- word order is a major determining cue in understanding relationships among words in a sentence

Cathy kissed Heathcliff
Word order in English (6)

- word order acquisition: between 2 and 3 years of age

- 3-year-old child:
  
  noun - verb - noun  
  = actor - action - object

- “The boy was kissed by the girl.”
- “kiss baby” vs. “baby kiss”
Cross-linguistic influence (1)

= transfer (positive or negative)
- is there a transfer of word order patterns?
- native speakers of ENG learning CRO
  - positive evidence
- native speakers of CRO learning ENG
  - positive evidence is insufficient, negative evidence is needed
Cross-linguistic influence (2)

- Transfer is not a general mechanism - rather, it is a specific resource.

- Native speakers of CRO use different cues for subject identification than native speakers of ENG.

- Competition Model - experiments that measure cue strength.
Which word is the subject?

Il giocattolo guarda il bambino.
The toy is looking at the boy.

- Italian cues: the boy.
- English cues: the toy.
Cross-linguistic influence (4)

- evidence from Competition Model studies:
  - learners first look for cues dominant in their L1
  - if unsuccessful, learners resort to L2 cues
Cross-linguistic influence (5)

- Croatian
  - unmarked: SVO
  - word order: rather liberal
  - highly inflected
  - also:
    - pro-drop
    - phonological orthography

- English
  - unmarked: SVO
  - word order: rather fixed
  - less inflected
  - also:
    - non-pro-drop
    - etymological orthography
Teaching grammar to YL

- National documents (Curriculum & Standard):
  - from 1st to 4th grade, “grammatical structures are never explicitly taught. Rather, students acquire them globally…”
Research (1)

- aim:
  - are Croatian YL aware of a fixed word order in English?

- participants:
  - 38 students from 9 to 11 years of age (beginning 3\(^{rd}\), 4\(^{th}\) and 5\(^{th}\) grade)
Research (2)

- methodology:
  - judgment task (CRO and ENG):
    - correct/incorrect
    - reformulation
    - interpretation

- why Croatian?
- what is “correct”?
Research (3)

- procedure:
  - talk
  - test
  - analysis
  - talk
  - analysis
Research (4): Croatian slip

**SVO** Jura voli banane.
(Jura likes bananas.)

**VSO** Voli Mateo jagode.
(*Likes Mateo strawberries.*)

**OVS** Trešnje voli Lucija.
(*Cherries likes Lucija.*)

- why these words?
- why these patterns?
Research (5): English slip

OVS  Pink likes Ivana.

SVO  Petra likes red.

VSO  Likes Igor blue.

• why these words?
• why these patterns?
Research results (1)

SVO Jura voli banane.  SVO Petra likes red.

- correct
- incorrect
Research results (2)

VSO Voli Mateo jagode.  VSO Likes Igor blue.

Transfer?
Research results (3)

OVS Trešnje voli Lucija.  
OVS Pink likes Ivana.

\[ \text{correct} \quad \text{incorrect} \]

\[ \text{correct} \quad \text{incorrect} \]
Research summary

• children are aware that word order deviating from the SVO pattern is incorrect in English

• transfer or implicit grammar?

• further research needed at both competence and performance level
Implications

- encourage curiosity
- talk about pattern contrasts between languages
- introduce metalanguage slowly and meaningfully
- be sensitive to opportunities for grammar learning
Thank you for your attention

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References

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