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From Binaries in Logocentrism to Gradience in Syntactic Markedness: Evidence from Persian

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Abstract

In Western logocentric thought, there is the notion of binaries which are hierarchical, one being valued (or 'privileged') and the other devalued (or 'marginalized'). Likewise, the notion of markedness in linguistics posits that some elements are unmarked, meaning they are more natural, or expected while others depart from the neutral and become marked. Syntactic markedness which according to Waugh and Lafford (1994) is related to word order, follows the same dichotomy of unmarked/marked. In this paper, authors conclude that binaries with the two opposite sides seem to be no longer applicable in syntactic markedness. Along the way, giving examples from Persian, authors discuss a gradience in syntactic markedness in which no longer binaries with opposing sides exist, but there is a gradience from fully unmarked to fully marked sentences.

Keywords: binaries, opposition, syntactic markedness, gradience, Persian

1. Introduction

The principle of markedness, although recently introduced into linguistics by the Prague school, seems to be not something new, but something at work for a very long time, starting with the categories of Aristotle. In the kind of thought named logocentrism by Derrida, binaries have the central position. It can be seen that every thing needs to have a center in logocentrism as the logos itself is the center. In this paper, we analyze a sentence and its variations from Persian using the findings in the perception of sentences and decide whether or not this center should be kept as an absolute one.

2. Logocentrism and Binaries

'Derrida sums up the essence of philosophy in the West in a single word, logocentrism'. (Dermot, 2002: 448) Although other terms such as 'phallogocentrism' and 'the metaphysics of presence' have been mentioned to convey the same concept. Logocentrism presupposes a central existence which is privileged over marginal ones. In Freudian terms, too, there is the privilege of the phallus. The indication of being or presence is of great importance in Western philosophy, starting from Plato to Descartes and then to Derrida. Presence is one side of the presence/absence binary opposition. In the binary oppositions, one part is favored over another. In the binaries of presence/absence, presence is the favored one. This is the same in 'logocentrism' itself; it puts emphasis on the centrality of logos, reason or spoken word. That is why Derrida later mentions 'différance', which is to challenge the centrality mentioned above. On the word of Derrida, metaphysics comprises hierarchies and subordinations in the dualisms it faces. Resulting from hierarchical relations in logocentrism, these dualisms encounter binary oppositions (Hölbling & Tally, 2007: 45). Having this in mind, we get to the notion of markedness in linguistics which conveys the same thought in terms of language items.

3. Markedness

'The principle of markedness developed in the last half century attempts to give organization to polarities that constitute language.' (Battistella, 1990) Markedness was first introduced in modern linguistics by Prague School structural phonologists Nicolai S. Trubetzkoy and Roman Jakobson. Markedness was first utilized in phonology to differentiate sounds by their phonological features. As an example consider [t] and [d]: in this example [t] is a voiceless sound whereas [d] is voiced, as a result [t] has the feature of [-voiced] and [d] lacks it. Therefore, a binary opposition of [-voiced] for [t] and [+voiced] for [d] is at work here. As another example consider [t] and [n]: the former lacking the nasal feature and the latter having it, provides us with [-nasal] for [t] and [+nasal] for [n]¹ (Waugh & Lafford, 2006). Crystal (2008: 295) Defines Markedness as 'an analytic principle' which shows the oppositions of features in linguistic pairs where in the presence of the feature, that feature is considered marked whereas unmarked is attributed to that feature in its absence. In the examples mentioned above, the sounds lacking the feature are considered unmarked whereas the examples having the feature are considered marked. According to Haspelmath (2006) the term "markedness" has been very popular in linguistics and used in many subfields. Therefore it has developed a wide sense. Two of the distinctions he makes are relevant here which will be dealt with later in the paper. He distinguishes one sense as 'distributional markedness' or 'markedness as restricted distribution' which is as the complexity of segments increases, the restrictedness of their phonotactic distribution rises, too. In this paper, this sense is extended to syntactic markedness. Another sense is 'cognitive markedness' or 'markedness as conceptual difficulty' which asserts that marked items need more 'mental effort or processing time' (Haspelmath, 2006). Hume (2011) distinguishes between three usages for markedness:

a. Descriptive markedness

An abstract relation holding over members of a set of observations displaying asymmetry, such that one subset is unmarked and the other is marked.

b. Theoretical markedness

A universal principle or laws that guide language acquisition, loss, inventory structure, processes, rules, etc. toward the unmarked form.

c. Markedness constraints

A technical term in Optimality Theory referring to a category of constraints that evaluate the well-formedness of output structures.

As we can see in the different usages of markedness proposed by Hume, descriptive markedness seems to be the usage conveying the same meaning as we proposed earlier in this paper. With the vast usages and definitions of markedness, it seems necessary to have a working definition which satisfies the meaning needed for the particular context of use. Following the logocentrism thought in western philosophy, we can see that the same thinking is at work here in the notion of markedness, one item is unmarked, preferred or the default one, the other is marked. The notions of privileged (for unmarked items) and marginalized (for marked items) seem to be relevant here.

4. Markedness in Syntax

Syntactic markedness is, according to Waugh and Lafford (1994), related to word order. Givón (2001) asserts that markedness has existed for a long time, dating back to

¹ Examples have been altered.

antiquity, although implicit. He mentions the traditions of 'describing declaratives before imperatives and interrogatives, actives before passives, main clauses before subordinate clauses, and affirmatives before negatives.' These show an intention of preferring one structure to another. He also cites Aristotle who believes '...The first statement-making sentence is the affirmation, next is the negation...', asserting the priority of affirmative sentences over negative ones. In addition, Shapiro (1983) believes the 'systematic skewing of linguistic contrast' to be 'a necessary reflection of the hierarchical nature of linguistic structures'. (as cited in *ibid*)

Markedness can also be viewed as Givón (1991b) 'as the governing meta-principle of iconicity, expressing the correlation – admittedly not always perfect – between structural and functional complexity': 'Categories that are structurally more marked tend to also be substantively more marked' (as cited in *ibid*). This point of view on markedness is also the one that will be dealt with in this paper.

5. Gradience

In his PhD thesis, Keller (2000) states that 'binary judgments on which linguists traditionally rely' are not often binary, but 'constitute an idealization'. Linguists tend to put items in either of the binary categories to fulfill that generalization. Keller argues that one would prefer to replace this binary generalization with the notion of gradience in order to achieve a more realistic understanding of language and to contribute to the theory of language.

6. Degrees of Markedness

Karimi (1989: 127), cites Jazayeri and Paper who consider the SOV word order to be the 'dominant' one in Persian affirmative sentences. She also mentions Moyne (1970), Farrokhpey (1979), Dabir Moghaddam (1982), and Samiian (1983) who consider Persian as 'a verb-final language in their dissertations'. Boyle (1966: 56), too, believes the 'normal' word order of Persian to be SOV. Due to the fact that Persian is a non configurational language with a free word order at sentence patterns, any deviation from the SOV word order will result in marked sentences. And the markedness as we will see, is not a matter of marked/unmarked dichotomies, but a matter of degrees.

In order to judge the degrees in markedness we turn to the comprehensibility of marked sentences based on human. Chomsky (1965: 20) believes the data obtained from the linguistic intuition of the native speakers to be 'unquestionable'. He asserts that human intuition can be used to get to the information needed for the study of communication:

"... the topic of successful communication in the actual world of experience is far too complex and obscure to merit attention in empirical inquiry, except as a guide to intuitions as we pursue research designed to lead to some understanding of the real world, communication included."(Chomsky, 2000: 70)

The cognitive intuition mentioned here is in line with human cognition which includes the approximation in the nature of human reasoning.

In a study that Lambers (2012: 135) performed on Dutch, he found that the word order of sentences has significant effects on the ease of comprehensibility of sentences. He found a higher rating for ease of comprehensibility for SO pattern which is the dominant one in Dutch (Dryer, 2011). Another research on native English speakers learning Spanish shows that word order significantly affects the degree of comprehension of the English speakers (Glisan,

1985). Lack of such investigations on Persian is strongly felt. Yet in another study by Love and Swinney (1998: 163), they concluded:

“In one, Spanish, evidence suggests that even though one is allowed a freer surface word order, it appears that the comprehension device is attempting to actively recover conceptual information in an underlying SVO order during ongoing comprehension (as is found in English; we note that similar evidence has been hinted at in early work in German; Clahsen, personal communication, March 1997).”

Supporting this, Golfam (2010: 86), cites Battistella (1996) and Greenberg (2005) who believe that marked structures contain more semantic load than unmarked ones. He believes that each structure, in addition to its referential meaning, has some pragmatic meaning resulting from the emphasis user puts on a specific part. Pragmatic meaning, as opposed to referential meaning, is not the sum of constituent meanings, but requires a change in the dominant word order giving marked structures. Concerning this matter, more semantic load means more processing and therefore a decrease in ease of comprehensibility.

Next, we will look at the order in which different deviations from the dominant word order in Persian occur. Kirk (2012: 26) cites Roberts and Roussou (2003) and concludes: ‘a derivation in which an item is moved is more complex than one in which there is no movement’. Thus, in this case, more deviation from the dominant word order, which comes from more movement, results in structures that are more complex. We need one more thing to consider in the movements and it is the degree of movements that happen. In a study by Bahlmann et al (2007) on the deviation from canonical word order in German, they found that if S is moved, ease of comprehension decreases. Therefore, the more S is moved, the more ease of comprehension decreases. As a result, The unmarked word order of Persian being SOV, we can get the following deviation put in order of movements that happens:

1. SOV	2. SVO	3. OSV
4. VSO	5. OVS	6. VOS

Table 1 – the order of decrease of ease of comprehension

Now we will justify the order mentioned in Table. Number 1 is the dominant unmarked word order. In number 2, the position of O and V changes and S is still in its place, adhering to its initial positions in number 1. In number 3, S has moved along with O to the beginning, pushing S to the second position. In number 4, movement of V and O happens but S is still in its second position. In number 5 and 6, S moves to the end of sentence with variations in O and V positions.

7. Word Order in Persian and Gradience

With this regard and based on the framework mentioned above, consider the following example sentence from Persian:

1. æli reza ra di² d.

ali reza-OM²see-PAST

‘Ali saw Reza.’

² Object Marker

It can be changed into any of the six forms below and still convey the same meaning (these patterns are ordered from (0i) to (0vi) based on increasing complexity resulting in decreasing ease of comprehensibility shown in Table 1):

<p>i. æli reza ra di: d. ali reza-OM see-PAST 'Ali saw Reza.'</p>	<p>ii. æli di: d reza ra. ali see-PAST reza-OM 'Ali saw Reza.'</p>
<p>iii. reza ra æli di: d. reza-OM ali see-PAST 'Ali saw Reza.'</p>	<p>iv. di: d æli reza ra. see-PAST ali reza-OM 'Ali saw Reza.'</p>
<p>v. reza ra di: d æli. reza-OM see-PAST ali 'Ali saw Reza.'</p>	<p>vi. di:d reza ra æli see-PAST reza-OM ali 'Ali saw Reza.'</p>

Table 1 – instances of example 1

Based on the framework mentioned above which presents word order and comprehensibility and word order variations, all instances of example 1 do not seem to be perceived the same. As justified in Table 1 and following Kirk (2012: 26) and Bahlmann et al (2007), a recommended argument would be that (i) as an unmarked pattern in which there is no movement at all is perceived more easily than (0ii). (ii) in which O and V move but S is still at the beginning preceding both object and verb is comprehended more easily than (0iii) in which it comes in mid position bearing less movement than (0v) and (0vi) where subject moves to the very end of sentence. This movement of subject in (0v) and (0vi) is clearly a longer movement creating more complexity and hence less comprehensibility (Ibid). We can finally conclude that (0iv) is less marked than (0v) and (0vi). (0v) and (vi) are in turn more unmarked than (iv). A gradience table can be drawn for these degrees of perception:

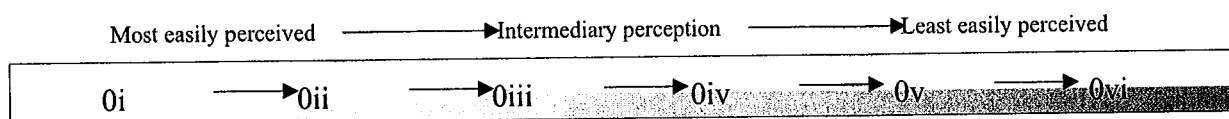


Figure 1 – the different perception level of the instances i through vi

8. Conclusions

In this paper, the authors tried to provide an explanation of the gradience observed in syntactic markedness. Since 'the main function of language' as Heine (1997: 3) puts it 'is to convey meaning', it is a suitable framework to consider the formal properties of language based on the function they perform. Based on the results and justifications mentioned in the previous section and Figure 1, it seems that the center mentioned in the introduction section, although still exists, does not seem to be an absolute one, but one that is more closely related to its previously marginalized alternatives. Therefore, it can be said that syntactic markedness in one sentence vs. its variations does not follow a strict unmarked/marked dichotomy but a gradience in which there are sentences that are partially marked. As a result, syntactic markedness ranges from fully unmarked sentences to fully marked ones with a gradience in between.

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