

THE EFFECT OF INFORMATION STATUS ON WORD ORDER: EVIDENCE FROM WOODS CREE

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ABSTRACT

Word order differences taken from conversational exchanges and narrative texts show how information status influences word order in Woods Cree, an Algonquian language spoken in northern Manitoba. The paper illustrates how the position of noun phrases in a sentence is conditioned by their information status. Three factors are shown to influence word order. They are old/new information, importance and topic shift.

In Cree, word order is to a large degree pragmatically conditioned. The exact conditioning however, is not fully understood since word order, as in many Amerindian languages, is based on a number of factors which include old/new information, importance and topic shift. This paper examines how these factors affect word order.

Before examining word order, a few comments about the basic structure of Cree are needed. Cree has a fairly complex verb morphology. The basic features of the verb stem are schematically represented in (1). For illustration purposes, in the first four examples, the morphemes within the verb are separated by '+' signs.

- (1) STEM → (preverbs) + initial + (medials) + final

The basic verb stem consists of an initial and a final. The initial provides the lexical content for the stem and is most often semantically an adverb, such as *sipwi-* 'away', as in (2) or *pahkihti-* 'by dropping' as in (3).

- (2) sipwî+pahtâ+w¹
away=by-running \AI=3I
's/he runs away'

¹ Abbreviations preceded by \ indicate stem type. They are as follows: \AI (animate subject, intransitive verb), \II (inanimate subject, intransitive verb), \TI(2) (transitive verb, inanimate object) and \TA (transitive verb, animate subject). The equals (=) sign signifies a morpheme boundary. Numbers indicate person. 3' marks an additional third person obviative category. I (Independent) and C (Conjunct) indicate two types of verb inflections. Other abbreviations in the paper are IPV (preverb type), neg (negative), incp (inceptive), fut (future), loc (locative), dim (diminutive) and prt (particle).

- (3) pahkihti+wat+i+pahtâ+w
 drop=bag=by-running \AI=3I
 's/he drops his or her bag while running'

The other obligatory part of the verb stem is the final, which often indicates the transitivity of the verb and the animacy of its nominal arguments. In examples (2) and (3), the final is *pahtâ*- 'by running'. This final specifies the verb as intransitive, and the nominal argument, in this case the subject, as animate.

The verb stem may also include a medial. The medial functions as a type of incorporated noun, as illustrated in (3) or a type of classifier, as in (4). The medial does not appear to have any effect on word order although it often signals the presence of an additional semantic role. In (3), the incorporated noun *wat*- 'bag' indicates a patient role. In (4), *asko*- 'body part' refers to the noun in the locative phrase *oskâtihk* 'on his/her leg'. In many examples, the medial provides the only indication of an oblique syntactic argument.

- (4) kâhcit+asko+si+w o+skât+ihk
 catch=body=by-heat \AI=3I 3=leg=loc
 'S/he caught his/her leg on fire.'

A verb may also include a number of preverbs. Preverbs occur before the initial and specify a variety of functions. In example (5), the verb initial is preceded by two preverbs, *kâ*- (an aspect marker) and *ohci*- (indicating the direction of the locative argument).

- (5) ikota kâ-ohci-pâniswâcîk
 there IPV=from=smoke-by-heat \TA=3p-3'C
 'They smoked them from there.'

In addition to the preverbs, initial, medial and final, obligatory pronominal affixes identify the core arguments on the verb. The core arguments in the examples presented in (1)-(5) are signaled by a suffix.

Partly because of the complex nature of the verb, many Cree sentences do not contain nominal arguments, as in (6). This example consists of a verb and four particles; a particle being any uninflected form. Particles tend to occur preverbally.

- (6) môda mâka ôta cîskwa takosin
 neg but here yet arrive \AI=3I
 'But he hasn't arrived here yet.'

Noun phrases are often used for clarification or emphasis. They occur most often when referents need to be distinguished, as in (7). They also occur in cases of potential ambiguity, as in (8), and when a new referent is introduced, as in (9). They may also have an appositional role. This is also illustrated in (9).

(7) kwâni aspinik kâ-takopitâcik nisikosa.
 then gone=3p IPV=bring\TA=3p-3'C 1=aunt=3'
 'Then they went to get my aunt.'

(8) kimis î-atoskîyîk.
 2=older-sister IPV=work\AI=2pC
 'You and your older sister are working.'

(9) mâta na-âcimâw, nimis.
 Martha 1fut=tell-story\TA=1-3I 1=old-sister
 'I will tell her a story about Martha, my older sister.'

Although it is uncommon to find a sentence which contains more than one nominal argument per clause, instances such as those listed in example (10) are possible. In Woods Cree, agreement, not position, is important. Therefore when a sentence contains a subject and an object noun phrase, the subject, object and verb may appear in any order, as illustrated in example (10).

- (10)
- a. môða môtscinam awina gâs. VSO
 neg free\TI=3-0'I person=3 gas
 'A person does not get gas for free.'
- b. iyakwîðiw mîna nâpîsîsak â-kî-pîsiwâcik isa ôhôtisîsak. SVO
 that=0' also boy=3p IPV=past=bring-prt owl=dim=3p
 home\TA=3p-3'C
 'And there was also the time the boys brought home the little owls.'
- c. nimâmâ pîpîwa kâ-otihtinât SOV
 1=mom baby=3' IPV=grab\TA=3-3'C
 'My mom grabbed the baby.'
- d. ayihîw piko pimiyy î-osihtât kôhkôm. OVS
 whatever=0 only grease IPV=make\TI=3-0'C 2=grand-mother
 'Your grandmother just made grease.'
- e. îcâc nîða kâ-kî-pimwatâmak. OSV
 Edith I IPV=past=carry-back\TA=1-3C
 'I carried Edith on my back.'

- f. kwâni kâ-postawatâmit nîda mâta. VOS
 then IPV=put-on-back\TA=3-1C I Martha
 'Then Martha took me on her back.'

Although there is evidence that the unmarked order in Cree is VO (Starks 1987), the non-configurational status of the Cree language means that other factors have a major influence on the word order. Many of these factors are related to information status. The concept of information status, developed by the Prague School (Firbas 1964) and expanded upon by the work of Halliday (1967) and others, explains why noun phrases occur in various positions in a sentence. One of the most well-known claims states that in unmarked clauses, theme (old information) precedes rheme (new information).² This principle was validated by claims that in languages with relatively strict word order the subject (generally old information) precedes the object (generally new information) as well as in languages with relatively free word order where noun phrases denoting old information generally precede noun phrases denoting new information (Firbas 1964). In a recent article however, Givón (1988) criticizes this claim stating that in many free word order languages, the reverse order is preferred. That is, important information precedes less important or old information. A similar principle occurs in Woods Cree. Noun phrases that denote new or important information generally precede noun phrases that denote old information.³

Although there are many definitions of new and old information (Prince 1981, Ariel 1985, Brown and Yule 1982), new information is viewed here broadly as information not previously known from the discourse. It equates roughly to Prince's 'textually-evoked' category and Ariel's 'linguistically given information'. For a more comprehensive analysis of the old/new contrast the latter two sources should be consulted. The paper simply examines the effect of new and old information on word order. The following equational sentences illustrate their effect on word order in Woods Cree.

- (11) nîpâ otapwiya anihi.
 3=paddle=3' that=3'
 'These are my dad's paddles.'

- (12) anihi nîpâ otapwiya.

² See Halliday (1967) for minor differences between theme and old information.

³ This unusual situation is not restricted to Cree. See Mithun (1986) and Tomlin & Rhodes (1992) for examples in other Amerindian languages.

that=3' 1=dad 3=paddle=3'

'Those are my dad's paddles.'

(13) nipâpâ anihi otapwiya.

1=dad that=3' 3=paddle=3'

'Those are my dad's paddles.'

Although examples (11)-(13) can all be translated as 'Those are my dad's paddles', these examples differ in the information they portray. Example (11) answers the question 'What are those?'. The part of the sentence that provides the answer to the question occurs first. The noun phrase *nipâpâ otapiya* 'my dad's paddles' contains the new information.

In example (12) the order of the constituents is reversed. Example (12) answers the question. 'Which paddles are my dad's?'. The clause initial pronoun *anihi* 'those' provides the new information.

Because noun phrases in non-configurational languages are generally a product of agreement, not position, a third possibility occurs in (13). This example contains a discontinuous noun phrase. It provides the answer to the question: 'Whose paddles are those?'. The part of the answer that most advances the communication, *nipâpâ* 'my dad', occurs first. In all three examples, the new information precedes the old information.

The same principle applies to noun phrases in clauses which contain a verb. When the clause contains more than one noun phrase, the noun phrase containing the new information precedes any noun phrase containing old information. This is illustrated in example (14).

(14)a. akwa mîna kotak awa awina kâ-kî-ayamit.
and also other this=3 person IPV=past=talk\AI=3C

'And one of the other people also spoke.'

b. iskôl iða îyako kâ-kî-aðimotah.
school prt that-one=3 IPV=past=talk\TI2=3-0'C

'And that person talked about school.'

c. kâ-kisîhtât awina iskôl, itwîw, akwa
IPV=finish\TI2=3-0'C person=3 school say\AI=3I and

d. itî kâ-ati-sipwîhtît...
where IPV=incp=leave\AI=3C

'When someone finishes school, he said, and leaves here...'

In (14b) *îyako* 'that one' refers back to the noun phrase introduced in example (14a): *kotak awa awina* 'one of the other people'. The pronoun *îyako* 'that one' refers to a referent previously identified. It contains old information. The noun phrase *iskôl* 'school', in this case the object,

contains the new information and therefore *iskôl* precedes *îyako*, giving OSV word order. In (14c) *iskôl* 'school' is still the object but now old information and *awina* 'person', the subject, is the new information. *awina* 'person' precedes *iskôl* 'school', resulting in VSO word order. The noun phrase containing the new information precedes the noun phrase containing the old information. If *iskôl* 'school' were the new information in 14c, VOS order would be preferred.

A second factor influences the word order of the verb. Because the verb marks the participants, therefore laying out the general plan for the whole sentence, it is usually more important than noun phrases in a Cree sentence. Hence, the verb is usually the obligatory component and in the unmarked case, precedes any noun phrase in the sentence. However, when the information denoted by a noun phrase is especially important to the discourse (as in the preceding example where it represents the theme of the discourse), the noun phrase occurs in preverbal position.⁴ The information denoted by the noun phrase may be old, previously identified information, or new, unidentified information because both new and old information may be important.

In example (14b), both *iskôl* 'school' and *îyako* 'that one' contain important information. *iskôl* introduces the topic of the talk and *îyako* 'that one' emphasizes that it is the speaker just introduced who is talking, not the previous one. In example (14b), both noun phrases precede the verb.

In (14c), the noun phrase containing the new information *awina* 'person' is generic. It is used for clarification purposes only. *awina* 'person' therefore follows the verb. The noun phrase that contains the old information *iskôl* 'school' does not add any information to the discourse, so it too follows the verb. The verb contains the most important information and therefore the verb precedes both noun phrases.

When the noun phrase does not contain important information, it either follows the verb as in (14c), or the participants are not represented lexically, as in (14d). In this example, the referent is indicated solely through pronominal affixes on the verb.

Another example pertains to the constituent order of the major constituents in a content question. In a content question, the clause initial constituent requests the new information. The rest of the clause represents old information. When the noun phrase in the rest of the clause contains

⁴ Although text frequency is often used as a measure of importance (Givón 1990: 907), the author has not relied on this. Importance here is determined by thematic context.

old information. When the noun phrase in the rest of the clause contains old information, as in example (15), the noun phrase is not generally important and follows the verb.

- (15) kîkwâdiw â-nitawîyihah ana iskwîw?
 what=0' IPV=want\TI=3-0'C that=3 woman
 'What does the woman want?'

In example (16), the noun phrase precedes the verb. The noun phrase *ana iskwîw* 'that woman' provides important, contrastive information and consequently occurs in preverbal position.

- (16) kîkwâdiw ana iskwîw â-nitawîyihah?
 what=0' that=3 woman IPV=want\TI=3-0'C
 'What does that woman want?' (as opposed to this woman)

A third factor that affects word order is topic shift. In a topic shift, a new referent becomes the discourse topic. This referent represents brand new information. Topic shift is therefore related to the principle of new information first. A noun phrase containing a new topic precedes any noun phrase containing old information. The topic shift however is signalled by the clause initial position of the noun phrase.⁵ Illustrative examples occur in (17) and (18). In these examples, the clause initial noun phrase that signals the new topic is separated from the verb by at least one particle. In example (17B), it is separated by the negative particle *îkâ*.

- (17) A: tânsi î-ispadîk?
 how IPV=happen\II=0C
 B: Celina îkâ î-matwîpimâtisit.
 Celina neg IPV=noise=live\AI=3C
 A: 'What happened?'
 B: 'Celina is no longer breathing (passed away).'

In example (18C), the noun phrase which indicates the topic shift, *nôhkom* 'my grandmother', is separated from the verb by two particles, *mîna* and *ôta*.

⁵ This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why particles tend not to appear in clause initial position in elicited sentences. When there are no preverbal particles, it is impossible to distinguish between clause initial and preverbal position. However, this situation rarely arises.

- (18) A: Viola? ôta na? kiko Viola?
 Viola here Q which Viola
- B: Viola Moose.
- C: nôhkom mina ôta ayâw.
 1=grand-mother also here be\AI=3I
- A: ôta na?
 here Q
- A: Viola? Here? Which Viola?
- B: 'Viola Moose.'
- C: 'My grandmother is also here.'
- A: '(She's) here?'

In other examples where noun phrases contain important, non-topic switching information, the noun phrases are usually preceded by particles, as in (19). They therefore generally fail to occur in clause initial position.

- (19) A: kida akwa awina?
 you and who
- B: nida akwa Helen.
 I and Helen
- A: ikota na Helen i-ayât.
 there Q Helen IPV=be\AI=3C
- A: 'You and who?'
- B: 'Me and Helen.'
- A: 'Helen's there?'

In conclusion, in Woods Cree, the core arguments are indicated by pronominal affixes on the verb and grammatical relations have little effect on word order. Although pragmatic factors cannot account for all instances, three pragmatic factors influence word order. First, noun phrases that denote new information generally precede noun phrases denoting old information. Second, noun phrases that contain important information tend to precede the verb and finally, noun phrases in clause initial position have an overwhelming tendency to denote shifts in topic. Most sentences therefore begin with particles or verbs. There is good reason for the verb first ordering in Woods Cree. The verb contains more important information than the noun phrase. It can mark both subject and object participants, thereby laying out the general plan for the whole sentence.

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