Prosody – a source of word-order microparameters

Danish grammarians have observed that in certain South Danish dialects OS (1b) is not required as it is in standard Danish allowing also for the order (1c).

1a Jeg så ikke Ruth.
I saw not Ruth

b Jeg så hende ikke.
I saw her not

c Jeg så ikke hende. (only SD)
Basbøll 1986, Pedersen 1993 view 1b as an application of the lightness rule (lethedsregelen) whereas 1c follows the likeness rule (lighedsregelen) in that the word order matches that of full DP objects, as in 1a. The optionality between the word order in 1b and 1c is also to be found in many Swedish and Norwegian dialects.

In this paper we demonstrate that in the dialects we have examined there is a correlation between the existence of a tone distinction and the optionality of OS. Standard Danish has no tone distinction and also does not allow the word order in 1c. Certain Swedish, Norwegian and SD dialects (a subset of the Danish dialects which lack glottal stops: the isogloss runs below the stød-line) exhibit tone distinctions in polysyllabic words (Accent 1 and Accent 2), and also allow 1c. Polysyllabic words in these tonal dialects have one of two word accents. Here we focus on Swedish and on the SD dialect spoken on Ærø and show not only that the correlation holds, but we also argue that the correlation follows from the prosodic properties of weak pronouns in general and the property of accent 2 to combine words together into one prosodic ‘tone’ unit (TU), Hellan 2005; Riad 2008. (We do not identify the particular prosodic unit at stake, but see Vigário 2010, Wetterlin and Lahiri 2012 and the references cited therein for discussion.)

The diagrams on the next page show the pitch contours of sentences pronounced in the SD dialect spoken on Ærø in a repetition task. The diagrams 2a and 2b clearly illustrate the rising accent 2 on the adverb+pronoun.

Interestingly enough, most examples with the shifted order (pronoun+adverb) were reversed by all three informants and pronounced with the pronoun following the adverb. The only case in which the shifted order was maintained was with the adverb ‘aldrig’ (never) which significantly has 2 syllables. This example is shown in 2c in which the pronoun is prosodically incorporated in the verb. (The talk will provide Swedish data as well).

Our reasoning goes as follows: It seems reasonable to assume that weak pronouns can incorporate into a verb (1b) or a subject (in non-subject initial clauses) - this is simply OS. Adverbs are unsuitable (primary) hosts for weak pronouns. However, in varieties with tone, an additional way of incorporation is available, incorporation into the Tone Unit. In varieties without this possibility, a weak pronoun following an adverb is left prosodically stranded, which makes the sentence ungrammatical.

We conclude that what drives the variation in word order is the microparametric prosodic properties of each dialect. Our conclusion supports the view that OS is a prosodically driven process as argued in XXX 2005 and XX 2012 and therefore also provides evidence against syntactic accounts of OS which cannot account for the covariation of prosodic properties and the optionality of OS presented here.


Vigário, Marina. 2010. Prosodic structure between the prosodic word and the phonological phrase: Recursive nodes or an independent domain? The Linguistic Review 27.


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