Word order and information structure in Ktunaxa

Background: This paper explores the relationship between information structure and syntax in Ktunaxa (also known as Kutenai, Kootenay), a language isolate spoken in parts of British Columbia, Montana, and Idaho. Previous on the language concluded that Ktunaxa has a basic V(erb)-S(ubject)-O(bject) word order, with VOS and SVO alternates (Morgan 1991, Dryer 1991).[1] The following sentences (adapted from Morgan 1991: p.397-400) show these three main word order alternates.

(1a) **Verb**-Object-Subject:
    ʔat ła·t-ił **mitx-ni**   tuq̓¢amna-s niʔ ni¢tahał-nana-niṅtik ¢ […]
    HAB ?-ADV shoot-IND bird-OBV   DEM boy-DIM-PL   and
    'The boys would shoot the small game and…'

(1b) **Verb**-Subject-Object:
    Qakił-ni niʔ tiłnamu   xaʔł¢in-ʔis […]
    say-IND   DEM old.woman dog-3.POSS
    'The old woman said to her dog…'

(1c) Subject-**Verb**-Object (+ benefactive object excluded in this example):
    Taxas niʔ tiłnamu   ¢xak-ił   **su·ki-ni** ʔa·kitła-ʔis-is […]
    then   DEM old.woman begin-ADV good-IND house-3.POSS-OBV
    'Then the old woman began fixing up the lodge […]'

Morgan (1991) writes that "[t]he order SVO is somewhat less common in narratives than VOS or VSO," attributing the presence of SVO sentences in elicited Ktunaxa to the influence of English (Morgan 1991, p. 395).
    None of these word orders have ever been given a syntactic analysis in a generative framework, nor have the factors conditioning their use (relating to information structure or otherwise) been described.[2]
    The present work aims to shed some light on the information structural underpinnings of this variety of word orders, and makes some predictions about Ktunaxa syntactic structure.

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[1] The grammar's obviation and direct-inverse system guarantee that no ambiguity can be introduced by any of the logical possible orders of VOS.

[2] "None of those who have collected primary data on Kutenai has — as far as I can determine — discussed FOCUS as such. None has described how a *wh*-question is to

[2] "None of those who have collected primary data on Kutenai has — as far as I can determine — discussed FOCUS as such. None has described how a *wh*-question is to be answered, and *wh*-questions themselves are mentioned only in passing." (Davis 2016: p. 1313).

Methodology: The experimental design employed in this work is based upon that of Calhoun (2015) and Hamilton (2015). It consists of a paradigm in which participants see an image, hear a question (recorded in Ktunaxa by my collaborator and consultant Violet Birdstone), and say an unscripted response to that question. The question-answering task is divided into five conditions, each targeting different varieties of focus. Table 1 below provides sample questions from one image (of six in total).

Focus in response	Question in Ktunaxa	English translation
Subject (wh-answer)	Qała k isnił ak¢qa kanuhusnanas?	Who is cutting an apple?
Object (wh-answer)	Qapsins k sił ak¢uqa Malyan?	What is Malyan cutting?
Subject (corrective)	K sakił ak¢uqa kanuhusnanas Piyał?	Is Piyal cutting an apple?
Object (corrective)	K sakił ak¢uqaʾ kuniłnakiniłs Malyan?	Is Malyan cutting bread?
VP/broad focus	Ka·s k skikił a·qannikit na kituq̓łiłqnamnam?	What are they doing in the picture?

Table 1. Sample stimuli from a single item of the experimental paradigm.

Results: Five native speakers of Ktunaxa participated in the experiment; the data from their responses directly conflict previous descriptions of the language. Rather than being verb-initial in all non-subject-focus cases (as might have been expected), participants' utterances were predominantly SVO— Figure 1 to the right demonstrates this trend. I conclude that the basic underlying word order of the language is SVO, but that there's persistent predicate focus that leads to VOS orders frequently in texts.
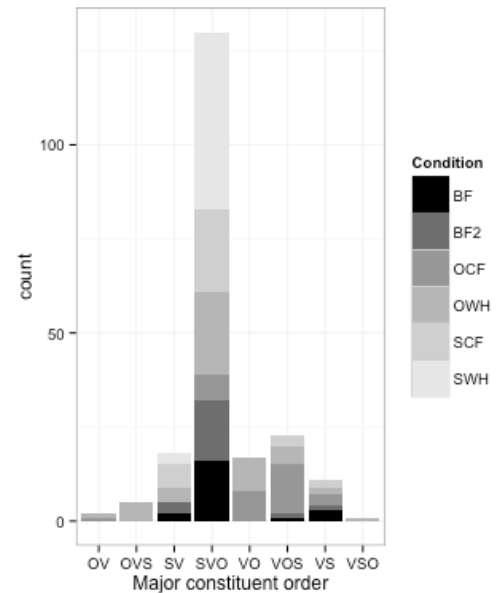

Figure 1. Word order in responses.

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