

Configurationality in Gayogoho:nɔʔ (Cayuga)

A concern shared by linguists and critics of linguistics is the matter of progress: Do we really know more about human languages in 2024 than we did in 1964, the date of Chomsky's *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory*? I'll argue that we know much, much more. One way of charting progress in a discipline is to focus on successive hypotheses about a particular topic, such as the progress of field theory in physics. This talk looks at the topic of **configurationality**, the question of how much structure languages have in common. It focuses on Gayogoho:nɔʔ (Cayuga), the native language of this region.

The issue of configurationality arose in the late 1970s, when the structural models developed for languages such as English were challenged by the facts of languages with freer word order. One response to this challenge was the idea that some languages are **nonconfigurational**: they lack the structure that is responsible for fixed word order in English. For example, generating the object as the sister of the verb in the verb phrase and the subject in a specifier outside VP accounts for the SVO order of English. On a nonconfigurational analysis of a language such as Japanese, both the subject and the object are generated inside VP in an n-ary branching structure, where the grammar stipulates only that the verb comes at the end of its phrase, thus generating both the order in (1a) and (b).

1. Japanese (ISOLATE)

- (a) Neko=ga inu=o sodate-ta.
cat=NOM dog=ACC raise-PAST 'The cat raised the dog.'
- (b) Inu=o neko=ga sodate-ta.
dog=ACC cat=NOM raise-PAST 'The cat raised the dog.'

The debate over how much configuration languages share led the discovery of subtler methods for determining underlying structure. These methods made it possible to demonstrate that languages including Japanese, Russian, and even the free word order language Warlpiri (PAMA-NYUNGAN; Australia) in fact have verb phrases, and structurally distinguish subjects and objects in underlying structure. In the 1980s, though, a new challenge was presented by polysynthetic languages such as Gayogoho:nɔʔ. In languages of this type, the arguments in a sentence can all be represented inside the verb, as in (2):

(2) Gayogoho:nɔʔ (NORTHERN IROQUOIAN; New York/Ontario)

- A-g-adad-ɔgwʔed-ɔ:ny-ɛ-ʔ.
OPT-1SG.A-REFL-person-make-BEN-PUNC 'I would make a person for myself.'

In (2), the subject (*I*), the object (*person*), and the indirect object (*myself*) are all spelled out inside the verb. This led to what is sometimes called the **pronominal argument hypothesis**, which holds that arguments in polysynthetic languages are realized where they are pronounced, inside the verb. The most sophisticated version of this hypothesis, Baker (1996), in fact posits an underlying configurational structure, but holds that overt noun phrases outside the verb, if present at all, occupy configurationally nondistinct adjunct positions. On this view, Northern Iroquoian languages are the world's last outpost of widely recognized nonconfigurational languages.

This talk will re-examine the properties that appear to motivate a nonconfigurational analysis of polysynthetic languages of the Northern Iroquoian type, and introduce new data that has largely escaped the attention of linguists.

References

Chomsky, N. 1964. *Current issues in Linguistic Theory*. Mouton. Baker, Mark. 1996. *The Polysynthesis Parameter*. Oxford University Press.