

# The discourse function of the postverbal constituents in SOV/SVO languages of Northern Siberia

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- Languages spoken in Northern Siberia share some typological features, e.g. vowel harmony, agglutinative morphology, nonfinite subordination, head-finality, etc. (Comrie 1981; Anderson 2004, 2006; Pakendorf 2010).
- Head finality results in their SOV configuration at the level of simple main (affirmative) clauses.  
  
→ The syntactic function of the clausal constituents determines their relative order.

## Background (cont.)

- There is considerable variation in word order between SOV and SVO/SVX in these languages (Grenoble 2000; Stapert 2013; Asztalos et al. 2017; Däbritz 2018).
  - However, we observe different discourse-pragmatic patterns:
    - In Tundra Nenets (Samoyedic), for instance, a postverbal constituent can only be interpreted as an *afterthought*.
    - In contrast, *focussed* constituents can also appear postverbally in Dolgan (Turkic).
- The postverbal position of a constituent seems to correlate with its discourse-pragmatic function.

## Research questions

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- Q1: What types of discourse-pragmatic functions are (not) allowed to appear in the postverbal position?
- Q2: What pragmatic, syntactic, and prosodic characteristics do the various postverbal constituents have?
- Q3: How the syntax and the discourse interacts in these languages?
- Q4: What (broader) syntactic generalization can be made for word order change based on our data?

# Hypothesis

- Given that these languages show different patterns concerning the availability of certain discourse functions for their postverbal constituents, we assume that these languages represent different stages of an ongoing change from head-final grammar to a head-initial one.
- The hypothesized directionality of the change is as follows:
  - afterthought, i.e. right dislocation >
  - backgrounding >
  - focus



# Languages and data

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# Languages



Source: Pakendorf (2010)



## Languages (cont.)

- Sociolinguistic data

Language	Language family	EGIDS	Nr. of Speakers
Tundra Nenets	Samoyedic	6b (Threatened)	20.000
Tundra Enets	Samoyedic	8a (Moribund)	40
Forest Enets	Samoyedic	8a (Moribund)	40
Nganasan	Samoyedic	6b (Threatened)	130
Dolgan	Turkic	6b (Threatened)	1050
Evenki	Tungusic	7 (Shifting)	11.000

- Word order and information structure
  - Generally, the languages under examination are claimed to be (S)OV/(S)XV languages.
  - The topic is situated clause-initially.
  - The focus either remains *in situ* or it moves to the position, in which it immediately precedes the finite verb.

- Sources and data
  - Tundra Nenets: fieldworks/consultations with a native speaker
  - Forest and Tundra Enets: *The Digital Corpus of Enets* (Khanina & Shluinsky in prep.)
  - Nganasan: *Nganasan Spoken Language Corpus* (Brykina et al. 2018)
  - Dolgan: *INEL Dolgan Corpus* (Däbritz et al. 2019)
  - Evenki: data collection from the project *Minority Languages of Siberia as our Cultural Heritage*

- The ratio of XV/VX

Language	XV	VX
Tundra Nenets	97,78%	2,22%
Tundra Enets	95%	5%
Forest Enets	95%	5%
Nganasan	83%	17%
Dolgan	85%	15%
Evenki	75%	25%

## Working definitions

- "*information structure* [...] is the formal expression of the pragmatic structuring of a proposition in a discourse."  
(Lambrecht 1994: 5)
  - The *topic* is understood as the item in the clause which the predication is made about ("aboutness topic"); its counterpart is the *comment*.
  - The *focus* is the item in the clause which the speaker considers and marks as important; also indication of alternatives; its counterpart is the *background*.
- *Topic* and *focus* are not opposed to each other, but work on different levels.

## The types of the postverbal constituents

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- An afterthought is a postverbal constituent that is, however, not part of the clause.
- Syntactically, it is analysed as right dislocation.
- Afterthought occurs in all languages under consideration here.

## Afterthought: pragmatics

- This postverbal constituent has a clarifying pragmatic function:
  - it provides a missing information, or
  - it repairs the incompleting information in the clause.

- (1) *Təndi-t'ə i-bahu kaðarkəbtü-ðü-n'ü? ɲansə d'a*  
that-EMPH be-NAR.3SG lamp-DST-POSS1PL again ALL  
*torəu-tuə-ʔ, l'üəʔsa kaðarkəbtüð-ə-ʔ.*  
be.useful-PTCP.PRS-PL Russian lamp-EP-PL  
'It is said, one needs them [=oil and kerosine] for our lamps,  
for the Russian lamps.'(ChND\_080719\_Life.024)  
[Nganasan]



## Afterthought: syntax

- There is no restriction concerning syntactic functions.

(2) *xasawa tolábi, padar-mʔ.*  
man read.3SG book-ACC  
'A/The man reads (it), a/the book.' [Tundra Nenets]

(3) *padar-mʔ tolábi(-da), túku xasawa.*  
book-ACC read.3SG(-SG) this man  
'He reads a/the book, this man.' [Tundra Nenets]

- However, the afterthought constituent must be referential.

(4) \**xasawa padar-mʔ tolábi(-da), lakrí.*  
man book-ACC read.3SG(-SG) quickly  
'\*A/The man reads a/the book, quickly.'  
[Tundra Nenets]

## Afterthought: syntax (cont.)

- It is possible to fill the base position of the afterthought constituent with a pronominal.

(5) *xasawa tuku-mʔ tolabi(-da), tuku padar-mʔ.*  
man this-ACC read.3SG(-SG) this book-ACC  
'A/The man reads (this), this book.' [Tundra Nenets]

- If the base position is not filled, there is an (obligatory) object agreement on the verb.

(6) *xasawa tolabi-da, tuku padar-mʔ.*  
man read.3SG-SG this book-ACC  
'A/The man reads (this), this book.' [Tundra Nenets]

(7) *??xasawa tolabi, tuku padar-mʔ.*  
man read.3SG this book-ACC  
'<sub>i</sub>A/The man reads (this), this book.' [Tundra Nenets]

## Afterthought: syntax (cont.)

- In the Samoyedic languages, verbal agreement encodes the discourse function of the direct object.
- Topical (and covert) direct objects always trigger agreement on the verb.
- Given, that the verb takes object agreement in postverbal object constructions, it is reasonable to assume the presence of a silent pronoun in the clause.

## Afterthought: prosody

- There is a prosodic gap between the clause and the postverbal element.

(8) *Krasnaj čumis-tar kel-li-ler, bihiê-ke.*  
red\_chumist-PL come-PST1-3PL 1PL-DAT/LOC  
'Red chumists came, to us.'  
(LaVN\_KuNS\_1999\_FateOfANortherner\_conv.LaVN.080)  
[Dolgan]

Afterthought [Dolgan]

- The intonation contour of the postverbal element is low and flat.

- A constituent that is neither an afterthought nor a focussed element can also appear in the postverbal position.
- It is a backgrounded (= non-focus) material that is part of the clause.
- This type of postverbal constituent is found in Nganasan, Dolgan and Evenki.

## Backgrounding: pragmatics

- It does not have a clarifying function, it represents known, given information.

- (9) *Turuhanskə-wə əjo-fki bi-s'o-n*  
Turukhansk-ACC go.downriver-PTCP.HAB be-PST-3SG  
*amtil-nun-mi əni:ŋəhə.*  
parents-COM-POSS.RFL mother-DEADREL  
'Until TurukHANSK my deceased mother went with her  
parents.'  
(UdVI\_2008\_MyMother\_nar.054) [Northern Evenki]

## Backgrounding: syntax

- It is not dislocated outside the clause, but it is one of the clausal constituents.
- There is a focus in the clause that is either the predicate or a preverbal constituent.
- Given that either the verb or a preverbal constituent is focussed, it is the position of the backgrounded material that shows that it does not belong to the focus domain.

(10) *maa-tə-küə*            *buə-tu-ʔ*            *bənti-ni.*  
what-EMPH-EMPH speak-AOR-3PL outside-LOC  
'They are talking about something on the street.'  
(JSM\_090809\_ParentsAndUncles\_nar.247)  
[Nganasan]

- There is no intonational break after the verb.

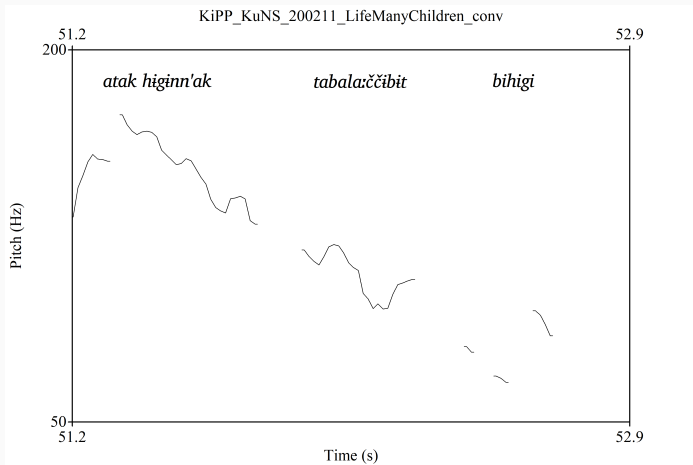
(11) [...] *atak hiɡinn'ak taba-laʒ-ččĭ-bit bihigi.*  
foot naked reindeer-VBZ-HAB-1PL 1PL  
‘[At that time there were no boots, nothing],  
BAREfoot we went with the reindeer.’  
(KiPP\_KuNS\_200211\_LifeChildren\_conv.KiPP.009)

Background [Dolgan]



## Backgrounding: prosody (cont.)

- The intonation contour of the postverbal constituent is flat.



- Argument focus can also appear in the postverbal position.
- It is its prosody that differentiates it from the background material.
- Postverbal argument foci occur in Nganasan, Dolgan and Evenki.
- The ratio of the preverbal and the postverbal foci in these languages corresponds to the ratio of XV and VX (cf. Däbritz 2019).

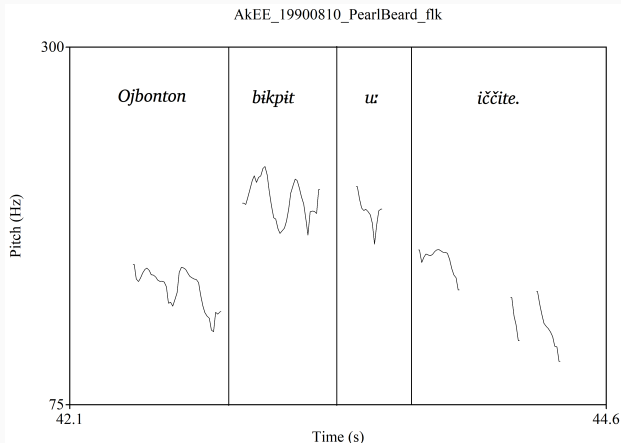
- In ??, the subject serves as the answer to an (implicit) wh-question → it is focussed.

- (12) a. “‘Who may this be?’, he thought.’  
b. *Ojbon-ton bik-pit u:*  
ice.hole-ABL lean.out-PST2.3SG water  
*ičči-te.*  
master-POSS3SG  
‘Out of the ice hole the master of WAtEr leaned  
out.’ (AkEE\_19900810\_PearlBeard\_flk.013)  
[Dolgan]

# Focus: prosody

- The postverbal focus is marked via pitch accent and the falling of the base frequency after the accent.

Postverbal focus Dolgan



# Conclusions

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- Three discourse-pragmatic functions are available for the postverbal constituent in languages spoken in Northern Siberia:
  - Afterthought
    - It is pragmatically analysed as a clarifying element that is referential.
    - It is not part of the clause, i.e., it is right-dislocated.
    - It has a coreferential intra-clausal pronominal that may be covert (see object agreement).
    - There is a prosodic gap between the verb and the postverbal constituent.
    - The intonation contour of the postverbal element is flat.

## Conclusions (cont.)

- Backgrounded material
  - It is pragmatically analysed as a given, known information (therefore it is also referential).
  - It is the part of the clause, it belongs to the non-focussed domain.
  - There is always a focussed constituent in the clause, which is either the verb or a preverbal constituent.
  - There is no prosodic gap between the verb and the postverbal constituent.
  - The intonation contour of the postverbal element is flat.
- Focus
  - It is pragmatically analysed as important information (see the answer to the wh-question).
  - It is an argument of the verb.
  - It has a pitch accent and a falling intonation contour.

## Conclusions (cont.)

- The discourse-pragmatic function of the postverbal constituent varies considerably across the languages discussed:
  - Afterthought
    - Tundra Nenets    • Tundra Enets    • Forest Enets
    - Nganasan        • Dolgan            • Evenki
  - Backgrounded material
    - Nganasan        • Dolgan            • Evenki
  - Focus
    - Nganasan        • Dolgan            • Evenki
- There is a broadening of the functions available for the right-periphery.
- The languages represent certain phases of an ongoing change.



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