Elements at the right periphery in an OV language: a syntactic orphan in Tundra Nenets

Nikolett Mus

mus.nikolett@gmail.com

Research Institute for Linguistics, Hungary

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1 Introduction

- Tundra Nenets (Northern Samoyedic, Uralic) is a strict verb-final language (1)–(2).

  (1) *Pavel Irina-mʔ mǎneʔŋa-ś.*
       Pavel Irina-acc see-3sg.pst
       'Pavel saw Irina.'

  (2) *Igoŕ jewej-mʔ ŋaworŋa-ś.*
       Igor soup-acc eat-3sg.pst
       'Igor ate the soup.'

- It also allows non-verb-final configurations (VX) (3).

  (3) *ŋəwe-q   yolć°ŋkəna xo-y°-da,   ńī̄-ta   yad°q-ḿi.*
       what-pl.gen after   find-pl.obj-3sg companion-pl.gen.3sg foorstep-acc.pl
       'After a while she found them, the footsteps of her relatives.' (Nikolaeva 2014: 220)

- Nikolaeva (2014) characterizes this constituent appearing after the verb as an 'afterthought' and states that the VX configuration is rather infrequent in the language.

- The ratio of XV/VX sentences are 0,21% (466/1) in newspaper texts (4), and 0,14% (693/1) in texts of social networking sites (5). This ratio is 2,22% (1079/24) in 'old' folklore sources (Asztalos et al., 2017).

  (4) *Ťeda śiďamboj-ŋœ ŋǎmge-mʔ śerta-ŋku-ńiʔ, tǎŋok lući   poŋ-kǎna.*
       now two-ess   what-acc do-fut-3du   such Russian year-loc
       'And now what will we two do, in such Russian times.' (Narana_ngaerm)

  (5) *Śeja-xa   xoj-xǎna soja-we-dmʔ,   Ńejto xœw-xǎna.*
       inside.the.tent-loc tundra-loc be.born-infer-1sg Neyto side-loc
       'I was born in the tundra, in a tent, close to Neyto.' (Vkontakte)

- Consultations with a native speaker revealed that VX constructions are considered common in the spoken varieties of the language (this is probably due to prescriptive norms of the written language).

- I developed questionnaires containing (i) target language manipulation elicitation, and (ii) (fieldworker-driven) paradigmatic substitution elicitation tasks (on the basis of Cinque, 1983; Averintseva-Klisch, 2007, 2008; Haegeman, 1991, 2009) and presented to a native speaker (Khadry Okotetto, male, born in 1991). The 'fieldworks'/consultations have been undertaken in Moscow in 2017, 2019, and online in 2020.

2 Background

- Tundra Nenets belongs to the Samoyedic branch of the Uralic language family.

- Tundra and Forest Nenets were described as the two main dialects (or dialectal groups) of the Nenets language until the turn of the 20th century. These two languages are, however, not mutually intelligible.

- The Tundra Nenets language has been spoken traditionally in the North-Eastern part of Europe and in the North-Western part of Siberia. Speakers live in three major administrative districts of the Russian Federation: the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug and the Taymyrsky Dolgano-Nenetsky District. Additionally, a few more groups of speakers can be found scattered in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, in the Komi Republic, and in the Murmansk region.

Figure 1: Tundra Nenets-speaking territories

- Tundra Nenets consists of three main dialect groups, namely the Western, the Central and the Eastern groups. Within these three, one can distinguish further sub-dialects.

2

- Tundra Nenets is endangered, its EGIDS (Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale) level is 6b (threatened) which means that it is used in oral communication in everyday interactions within all generations, but there is a continuous decline in the number of speakers (cf. Trevilla 2009; Eberhard et al. 2019)

- According to the latest population Census of the Russian Federation (2010) there are 21,926 Nenets speakers, which is c. 50/% of the total number of the 43,777 people who identified themselves as Nenets. The census does not differentiate between the Tundra and Forest Nenets languages. The number of Forest Nenets speakers was approximately 1,000–2,000 in the early 2000s (Toulouze, 2003; Koshkareva, 2005; Volzhanina, 2007). Thus, the estimated total number of people who speak Tundra Nenets as their mother tongue is less than 20,000.

3 VX construction in Tundra Nenets

- Tundra Nenets allows their constituents to occur after the verb in spoken varieties of the language.

- The post-verbal element, nevertheless, is prosodically not integrated into the host sentence, but it involves a special intonation: there is always a gap/pause (marked by comma or dash in the written sources) between the verb and the phrase that follows it. The VX construction is not considered to be grammatical without the intonation gap.

(6) *Pavel mǎneʔŋa-ś Irina-mʔ.
     Pavel see-3sg.pst Irina-acc
     intended meaning: 'Pavel saw Irina.'

(7) *Irina-mʔ mǎneʔŋa-ś Pavel.
     Irina-acc see-3sg.pst Pavel
     intended meaning: 'Pavel saw Irina.'

- The intonation contour of the post-verbal phrase is low and flat.

3.1 VX or VX*?

- The number of phrases that can appear post-verbally is limited: there is at most one phrase at the right of the finite verb, compare (8) and (9).

(8) pida Irina-mʔ mǎneʔŋa-ś, Pavel / t́uku xasawa.
     3sg Irina-acc see-3sg.pst Pavel / this man
     'He saw Irina, Pavel / this man.'

(9) *pida Irina-mʔ mǎneʔŋa-ś, Pavel t́eńana   / t́eńana   Pavel.
     3sg   Irina-acc see-3sg.pst Pavel yesterday / yesterday Pavel
     intended meaning: 'He saw Irina, Pavel yesterday.'

- Besides, coordinate XPs can also be after the verb.

(10)   *piди? Irina-m? măne?ŋa?-xăn-ź, Pavel ńabı́ Oleg.*
         3du   Irina-acc see-3du-pst   Pavel and Oleg
         'They (two) saw Irina, Pavel and Oleg.'

3.2   The pragmatic function of the post-verbal phrase

- The post-verbal phrase repairs the (assumably) unclear information in the host sentence by additional details, and thus it helps to identify its referent in the discourse.

   (11)   *Pavel ńe-m?   măne?ŋa-ś – t́uku săwa ńe-m?.*
            Pavel woman-acc see-3sg.pst   this good woman-acc
            'Pavel saw the woman, this good woman.'

   (12)   *jăxa-ko-ća-?   xœw-xăna jiĺeŋa-xa?, jabta-ko   jăxa-?   xœw-xăna.*
            river-dim-dim-gen side-loc   live-3du   narrow-dim river-gen side-loc
            'They (two) lived by the side of a small river, by the side of a small narrow river.'

   (13)   *t́iki   ḿa-kăna jile-dm?, ńe-ńi   ḿa-kăna.*
            that tent-loc live-1sg   mother-gen.1sg tent-loc
            'I live in that tent, in my mother's tent.'

3.3   The relation between the post-verbal phrase and the host clause

- In the host clause, there can be an element that is coreferent with the post-verbal phrase. This element is most frequently

   – a (definite) lexical noun (or an NP/DP)

     (14)   *Pavel ńe-m?   măne?ŋa-ś, Irina-m?.*
              Pavel woman-acc see-3sg.pst Irina-acc
              'Pavel saw a/the woman, Irina.'

   – a personal pronoun

     (15)   *Pavel śita   măne?ŋa-ś, t́uku săwa ńe-m?.*
              Pavel 3sg.acc see-3sg.pst this good woman-acc
              'Pavel saw her, this good woman.'

   – a demonstrative

     (16)   *Xasawa t́uku-m? tolabı́,   t́uku kniga-m?.*
              man   this-acc read.3sg this book-acc
              'The man reads this, this book.'

- Technically, all NP-types are allowed to corefer with the post-verbal phrase. PPs and adverbs can also appear in the host sentence.

   (17)   *t́iki   ḿa-kăna jile-dm?, ńe-ńi   ḿa-kăna.*
            that tent-loc live-1sg   mother-gen.1sg tent-loc
            'I live in that tent, in my mother's tent.'

- This coreferential element/phrase is, nevertheless, not obligatory in the host sentence. (It can be somewhere else in the previous sentences in the discourse.) Still, a previously introduced coreferential element seems to be obligatory somewhere in the context.

- In the cases where an overt coreferent element occurs, there seems to be an obligatory 'matching' in the number and case features of the clause-internal element and the post-verbal phrase.

(18) *Pavel śita   măneʔŋa-ś, *t́uku săwa ńe.*
      Pavel 3sg.acc see-3sg.pst this   good woman
      intended meaning: 'Pavel saw her, this good woman.'

(19) *jăxa-ko-ća-ʔ   xœw-xăna jiĺeŋa-xaʔ, *jabta-ko   jăxa-ʔ   xœw.*
      river-dim-dim-gen side-loc   live-3du   narrow-dim river-gen side
      intended meaning: 'They (two) lived by the side of a small river, by the side of a small narrow river.'

- This suggests that the post-verbal phrase is grammatically linked to the clause-internal phrase.

3.4 The syntactic category, function and information status of the post-verbal phrase

- There seems to be no restriction on the function and/or category of the post-verbal phrase.

(20) *Irina-mʔ măneʔŋa-ś, Pavel.*
      Irina-acc see-3sg.pst Pavel
      'He saw Irina, Pavel.'   [Proper name, Subject]

(21) *Xasawa tolaɓí-da,   kniga-mʔ.*
      man   read-sg.3sg book-acc
      'The man reads it, a/the book.'   [Noun, Object]

(22) *Wera kniga-mʔ temda-ś,   t́uku ńe-n.*
      Vera book-acc buy-3sg.pst this woman-dat
      'Vera bought a book for her, for this woman.'   [DP, Indirect object]

(23) *t́iki ḿa-kăna jile-dmʔ, ńe-ńi   ḿa-kăna.*
      that tent-loc live-1sg mother-gen.1sg tent-loc
      'I live in that tent, in my mother's tent.'   [PP, Locative adjunct]

- However, it is required for the post-verbal phrase to be known/discourse-old. Therefore, an expression that is discourse-new, i.e. cannot have an antecedent does not appear after the verb. Therefore, the VP-adverb in (24), for instance, cannot appear after the verb.

(24) **Sergej Maša-mʔ meńe,   saɓe.*
      Sergi   Masha-acc love.3sg very_much
      intended meaning: 'Sergei loves Masha very much.'

- Similarly, a post-verbal constituent cannot occur neither in an all-new sentence, i.e. in the case of sentence focus, nor in a clause where the whole predicate is in the focus.

  (25)   Q1: What happened?

            Q2: What does the man do?

            A: *_Xasawa tolabí,   kniga-mʔ._
                man   read.3sg book-acc
                intended meaning: 'The man reads the book.'

- Additionally, neither a wh-phrase nor the answer to a wh-phrase can appear in the post-verbal position.

  (26)   *_Xasawa tolabí,   ŋămge-mʔ?_
          man   read.3sg what-acc
          intended meaning: 'What does the man read?'

  (27)   Q: What does the man read?

            A: *_Xasawa tolabí,   kniga-mʔ._
                man   read.3sg book-acc
                intended meaning: 'The man reads THE BOOK.'

  ⇒ Thus, an information focus cannot appear after the verb.

- Furthermore, the post-verbal phrase cannot express contrast.

  (28)   Q: Does the man read a book?

            A: *_Xasawa tolabí,   gazeta-mʔ._
                man   read.3sg newspaper-acc
                intended meaning: 'The man reads A NEWSPAPER.'

  ⇒ Thus, a contrastive focus cannot appear after the verb.

- Finally, a personal pronoun cannot appear after the verb either.

  (29)   *_Pavel Irina-mʔ măneʔŋa-ś, śita._
          Pavel Irina-acc see-3sg.pst 3sg.acc
          intended meaning: 'Pavel saw Irina, her.'

- NOTE: "The presence of a free-standing personal pronoun as a subject or object is typically conditioned by special considerations such as emphasis, contrast or focussing" (Nikolaeva, 2014: 386).

- Intuitively, this leads to an observation that the post-verbal element can be a topic, but cannot be a focus.

- The fact, that the 'only'-focus allowed appearing after the verb contradicts to this observation.

(30) *Wera kniga-mʔ temda-ś,   Galina-ŕi-nʔ.*
      Vera book-acc buy-3sg.pst Galina-only-dat
      'Vera boght a book, only for Galina.'

- There is no restriction in the syntactic function and/or information status of the post-verbal phrase. Nevertheless, these examples above indicate that the post-verbal item must be referential.

3.5   The syntax of the VX construction: towards a possible analysis

- There are several approaches one can adopt to explain this construction in Tundra Nenets. One obvious analysis – following e.g. Haegeman, 1991; Averintseva-Klisch, 2008 – is that the post-verbal phrase in Tundra Nenets VX constructions is a syntactic 'orphan' phrase, i.e. it is not attached to the clause. There are arguments in favor of this analysis.

  - First, the post-verbal phrase can have a (relatively) free position in its host sentence. Thus, it is not tied to the right periphery.

    (31) *Pavel (săwa) ńe-mʔ,   t́uku săwa ńe-mʔ,   măneʔŋa-ś.*
          Pavel good   woman-acc this good woman-acc see-3sg.pst
          'Pavel saw a (good) woman, this good woman.'

  - Second, it is possible to split the PossP and place the possessee after the verb. In such cases the possessor is in the nominative case.

    (32) *Igor-ʔ   ŋano-da ŋad́iḿa,   ńaxărʔ jeśer-ta.*
          Igor-gen boat-3sg appear-3sg three   sail-3sg
          'Igor's boat appeared, three sails of his boat.'

  - NOTE: lexical possessors always stand in the genitive case in PossPs.

    (33) *Igor-ʔ   ŋano-nda   ńaxărʔ jeśer-ta*
          Igor-gen boat-gen.3sg three   sail-gen.3sg
          'three sails of Igor's boat'

  - This shows that the post-verbal possessor is not interpreted as the possessor of the intra-clausal possessed item.
  - Third, object agreement on the verb seems to be obligatory in cases when the object is post-verbal.

    (34) *Pavel măneʔŋa-da/?*-∅-ś, Irina-mʔ.*
          Pavel see-sg.3sg/3sg-pst   Irina-acc
          'Pavel saw her, Irina.'

    (35) *xasawa tola-b'i-da/?*-∅-,   padăr-m.*
          man   read-dur-sg.3sg/-3sg book-acc
          'A/The man reads (it), the book.'

  - NOTE: object agreement generally appears on transitive verbs with covert pronominal and topical objects (Nikolaeva, 2014).

- Alternatively, the post-verbal object can be topical and thus it can trigger agreement on the verb.

  ⇒ The post-verbal phrase seems to be syntactically independent from its host sentence
- This analysis is, nevertheless, not without problems. The interpretation of the orphan is licensed by the antecedent in the host clause. Besides, the orphan receives its syntactic features, i.e. number and case from its coreferent in the previous cluase. This 'feature matching' seems to be obligatory between the post-verbal phrase and the antecedent.

- Alternatively, the VX construction can be an ellipsis remnant (following e.g. Bruening, 2015; Ott and Struckmeier 2016; a.o. this approach involves the leftward movement of the post-vebral phrase and the delition of the clause).

  - It explains the feature matching of the post-verbal phrase.
  - Technically, the obligatory object-agreement favors this approach, i.e. the post-verbal phrase is a topical object that first undergoes topic-movement and then the clause is elided.
  - There is a problem with this proposal: we find asymmetry between right-dislocation and left-dislocation.

    (36) *Pida ti-da   tăńana me-ʔ, Sergey-ʔ.
          3sg reindeer-pl.3sg there   be-3pl Sergei-gen
          intended meaning: 'His reindeers are there, Sergei's.'

    (37) Sergey-ʔ, pida ti-da   tăńana me-ʔ.
          Sergei-gen 3sg reindeer-pl.3sg there   be-3pl
          'Sergei's, his reindeers are there.'

  - Besides, the post-verbal XP is prosodically not integrated in the host clause. (What is the intonation pattern of the coordinated clauses in Tundra Nenets?)

3.6   The historical aspect of VX

- The ratio of XV/VX is 2,22% (1079/24) in historical sources.

- In the written sources, the post-verbal phrase is separated with a comma → Does comma mark the intonation gap?

- The number of post-verbal phrases seems to be limited into one phrase.

- Old/known, i.e. seemingly referential information can follow the verb. → It has the same pragmatic function.

  (38) Tad ťika-d śaḿan ja-mʔ malʔ sejraj-da,   ťiki xæbiďe ji-ka'e.
        then this-abl every land-acc all merge-sg.3sg this holy water-loc
        'Then each land submerged in this holy water.' (L47: 14)

- There seems to be no correlation between the syntactic category and function of the post-verbal phrase and its position.

  ⇒ There is no change in the post-verbal pattern in the last c. 100 years.

4 Interim summary

- In this talk, I have shown that

    - the phrase after the verb is prosodically not integrated into the host clause, but there is a gap/pause between the phrase and the host clause;

    - the number of phrases that can follow the verb is limited to one phrase (even coordinated phrases);

    - the post-verbal phrase repairs the information provided in the host sentence;

    - the host clause can have an element that is coreferent with the post-verbal phrase, and there is an obligatory feature-matching between them;

    - the syntactic category and function of the post-verbal phrase is not restricted, but it must be referential;

    - the post-verbal phrase is either a syntactic orphan or an (ellipsis) remnant (but both analysis have been challenged).

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