THE SYNTACTIC SHIFT OF BERBER: FROM VSO TO TOPIC-INITIAL

Abdel El Hankari
University of Queensland

Berber, an Afroasiatic language, has always been reported in the literature to have a basic/neutral VSO order. This characteristic is found in both main and embedded clauses. This talk disputes this claim, and argues that the variety examined here has now moved away, but not completely though, from VSO. Instead, it has adopted a topic-fronting system, which can be filled by more than one element in the clause. The proposed claim is based on two pieces of evidence: (1) the grammatical judgment of native speakers prefer SVO over VSO, (2) when the object of the verb is a clitic, both the verb and its object (VP) are required to be in the initial position of the clause. Given these facts, I argue that the two elements instantiate a topic-fronting phenomenon. That is, the language has now acquired a discourse configurational system that requires the initial position of the clause to be filled with topic. The latter can either be a lexical subject or a VP.

The talk then goes on to account for this typology at the theoretical level. I first argue that the topic position is in Spec-IP (1-2). This entails that both the subject and the VP alternate on this same position:

1 SVO: [IP_i **subject** [I_j verb] [VP_I [V_j [NP object]]]]

2 V+ $_{[OBJECT\text{-}CL]}$S: [IP_i **VP** [I] [VP subject] $_i$[V′ verb] [NP object-CL]]]]

When the subject moves to Spec-IP it is the topic (1). Likewise, when the VP moves to Spec-IP it acquires the topic property (2). This ultimately amounts to the fact that Berber is topic-initial. With respect to the VP-topicalisation, I argue that it proceeds under a typology commonly known among Germanic as VP-remnant, which includes the verb and its object but excludes the subject, resulting in the topicalisation of the whole VP.

The embedded clauses require the verb to be in the initial position. This was taken as evidence that Berber is indeed verb-initial (Cadi 1990). Contrary to common belief, this is the result of a completely different configuration; it is due to the movement of V-to-C, i.e. an instance of verb-second (V2). While this typology is known to be a property of Germanic, it is also found in Breton (Celtic), another VSO language, (Shafter 1995). As for the motivation of this movement, I show that this is due to the feature [± focus] in C, triggered by the movement of the object as a wh- to Spec-CP, therefore requiring its head-C to be filled so that agreement under Spec-head can proceed.

A unified analysis is then proposed which identifies two types of information structure: Topic-Comment for main clauses, and Focus-Subject for embedded clauses.

Cadi, Kaddour. 1990. *Transitivité et Diathèse en Tarifit. Analyse de Quelques Relations De Dépendances Lexicales et Syntactiques*. Doctorat D'état. Sorbonne Nouvelle.

Schafer, Robin (1995). *Negation and Verb Second in Breton*. Natural Language and Linguistic Theory 13.1, 135-172.

Contact: Mr. Abdel El Hankari, School of English Media Studies and Art History, University of Queensland, QLD 4072, Australia. Ph: 0738480114. Email: a.hankari@uq.edu.au