Standard Average European as an exotic language

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To start with, the idea of studying the typology of European languages did not make much sense to me. For many years, I have regarded typology as a method rather than as an area of study in its own right: it is one of several ways to find out about the nature of human language and from this point of view, restricting the domain to a geographical area is a rather strange thing to do. However, I had some second thoughts. One of the greatest problems that the universal study of human language has had to cope with has indeed been the European bias: most linguists have been speakers of European languages, and the other languages that they have known or had access to information about have more often than not been European. As Bell (1978) notes, even linguists who have an ambition to widen their perspective mostly end up with a European or even Indo-European bias in their data bases. This would of course not be so problematic if it were not the case that European languages are much more like each other than languages are in general. I think most of us still have a subconscious view of the "default" language as being something between English, French, German and perhaps Italian — actually, and probably not accidentally, something very much like Esperanto. One could thus turn the problem upside down: in what respects are European languages special and to what extent are the structures you find there "marked"?

At this point, I recall the label "Standard Average European" coined by Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) in his discussions of the relation between language and thinking, and it seemed to me that one might (without of course buying the ideology connected with it) discuss the problems mentioned under this heading, adding "as an exotic language" in order to suggest that it might be a good idea to get out of our ordinary European perspective and think of the 100 odd European languages as if they were, say, the languages spoken in the North West corner of New Guinea. In the rest of the paper, I shall be suggesting a list of phenomena that should be looked at, taking as my point of departure some perhaps not very well-known Swedish research.

Natanael Beckman, who was Professor of Swedish in Göteborg between the two World Wars, wrote a fairly long paper in 1934 entitled (in translation) "West European Syntax — Some Innovative Constructions in the Nordic

and other West European Languages". In this work, Beckman notes that there are a number of common features in the grammars of modern West European languages, including the Germanic languages and in the Romance group at least French, which are not found in the "old" languages (*forn-språken*). Beckman's perspective is thus historical and entirely internal to Europe; still, some of the phenomena he points to are of interest also to general typology. In particular, he notes two features which appear in roughly the same area: (i) "inversion as an expression for direct interrogative sentences", i. e. the systematic marking of the distinction between declaratives and interrogatives by SVO vs. VSO word order, (ii) the use of formal and "impersonal" subjects such as German *es* in sentences such as *Es kommt ein Mann* and *Es regnet*. An important point that Beckman makes is that in languages where, e. g., 'It is raining' is expressed by a one-word sentence the inversion mechanism cannot be used to distinguish different sentence-types. Beckman's observation is taken up to discussion and generalized in Hammarberg & Viberg (1977), a work focussing on those typological features of Swedish that present particular difficulties for second language learners. Their "subject placeholder constraint" is roughly equivalent to what is nowadays commonly referred to as the "non-Pro-Drop" character of West European languages, i. e. the fact that the subject slot in finite clauses must normally be filled, even in cases where the referent of the subject is contextually given or where the construction is impersonal. They also note, quoting Ultan (1969), that inversion as a device for marking yes-no-questions seems to be rather infrequent outside Europe, and that word order is exploited in Continental Scandinavian and some other Germanic languages also for distinguishing between main and subordinate clauses, so that one might argue that these languages rely to an unusual extent on word order as a syntactic device, in particular for distinguishing clause types. If Beckman's conjecture is right, such a system could only arise in a non-Pro-Drop language, and given Ultan's observations that "YNQ-inversion implies a basic order type in which subject precedes verb", which, in view of the absence of rigid SOV languages with YNQ-inversion, might be strengthened to a postulation of a strong connection between YNQ-inversion and SVO order, the conditions on what a language should look like in order to allow such syntactic exploitation of word order seem rather tight.

In addition, one can make a few other observations. In the discussion of the "Pro-Drop Parameter" postulated in Government and Binding theory one usually assumes that there are two main types, one as in English, where there must (practically speaking) always be either a lexical or a pronominal subject in every finite clause, and one as in Latin, where pronominal non-

emphatic subjects can normally be dropped, and in addition some intermediate types. There is, however, a third type, which is not very well represented in Europe but which appears to be quite frequent in various other parts of the world. This is the kind of system where a pronominal subject is required in all sentences, irrespective of whether there is an additional lexical subject or not: in other words, among the counterparts of (1 a—d), only (c—d) are grammatical.

(1) a. *Runs.*
     b. *John runs.*
     c. *He runs.*
     d. *John he runs.*

One problem when trying to find good examples of this type of placeholder constraint is that it is often quite difficult to see whether the morphemes that I am here referring to as "pronominal subjects" are really pronouns or, rather, agreement affixes. One interesting system within our geographical domain, viz. Genoese, is described by Vattuone (1975). He states the constraint as follows (1975: 349): "In Genoese finite 3rd person verbal forms normally must be preceded by a nominative clitic ('u' for m. sg., 'a' for f. sg., 'i' for pl.). This clitic and the verb either both agree with the relational subject ... or neither agrees." For example, 'The neighbours are coming' would be

(2)   *I vežiŋ   i vänu*
       neighbours come

(where *i* has the dual function of clitic and definite article). It should be clear from this description that the clitic is separate from the morphological agreement between verb and subject. What I want to claim here is that Genoese illustrates a separate type of placeholder constraint, or if we like, another possible value of the Pro-Drop parameter: "Every finite (3rd person) clause must contain a pronominal subject". In this perspective, the correct formulation of the constraint in English or Swedish would be "Every finite clause must contain a pronominal subject unless there is a lexical subject". One argument in favour of treating the constraints in Genoese and Germanic as basically of the same nature is that we find "dummy" subjects in roughly the same kinds of constructions, cf.

(3)   *U ćöve* 'It is raining'

(4)   *U vëže na dona* 'There comes a woman'

Such dummy subjects are also found, interestingly enough, in another (non-European) language with a constraint similar to that of Genoese, viz.

Sotho (a Bantu language spoken in Lesotho and South Africa). In Sotho, every finite verb is preceded by a 'subject concord'. In impersonal constructions including, e. g., impersonal passives, the subject concord is *go*:

(5)   *Go botšididi ka ntlê* 'It is cold outside'

(6)   *Go a jewa* 'There is being eaten here'

As in Genoese, there is an opposition between 'normal' subject-predicate constructions with agreement and a construction corresponding to *there*-insertion cases in English, cf.

(7)   *Ba agilê mô Basotho* 'The Sothos live here'

(8)   *Go agilê Basotho mô* 'There live Sothos here'

(examples from Northern Sotho [Ziervogel et al. 1979]). In both these languages, then, impersonal subject clitics show up according to rules very similar to those governing the use of dummy subjects in the West European languages. Notice also that Genoese obeys the general tendency for first and second person pronouns to be more easily droppable than third person pronouns (manifested e. g. in Finnish and Russian). A theory that treats the Genoese-Sotho type of placeholder constraint as radically different from that of West European languages thus seems to run the risk of missing significant generalizations.

Notice that the Genoese-Sotho type is much less well suited to the systematic use of word order as a syntactic device, since the position of the clitic relative to the verb is constant. It is not surprising that there are no word-order differences between declaratives and questions in Genoese (the relative order of the lexical subject and the verb is due to differences in information structure or FSP according to Vattuone). I have no statistics, but it seems that of the two kinds of placeholder constraints, the Genoese-Sotho type is more widespread among the languages of the world than the Germanic one. If this is correct, it strengthens the impression we have already formed that the West European languages are somewhat special from the syntactic point of view and that we have something that looks like a conspiracy of factors that favour the use of word order as a device for distinguishing clause types. Further possible accomplices in this conspiracy might be e. g. other "placeholder constraints" than the surface subject constraint, such as the obligatoriness of the finite verb, which seems to be directly related to the presence of an overt copula. I shall briefly mention some other properties of European languages which seem to conspire to give them their particular typological profile.

It has been noted that the West European way of expressing possession, viz. using a transitive verb (*have*) where the owner is the subject and the possessee the direct object, is a relatively infrequent construction (see, e. g., Clark 1978). Two points can be made here. One concerns the existence of periphrastic Perfect constructions based on a possessive construction like the English *I have run*. Whereas there is at least one example of such a construction which is based on a different kind of possessive construction (in some North Russian dialects), the majority of the attested examples of possessive-based Perfects are of the *have*-type and indeed from Europe. We thus see here another example of two presumably connected traits that are quite frequent in Europe but less so in most other parts of the world. The other point relating to the European *have* construction is a more general one. One recent historical development in West Europe is the decrease of constructions in which the most salient animate participant is not given subject status. I am thinking of examples such as 'I dream' which used to be constructed as 'Me dreams' in earlier dialects of Germanic. As far as I know, the West European languages are quite liberal in allowing non-agentive subjects as compared to many other languages in the world. It seems to me — or to use more idiomatic Standard Average European — I think that the use of a transitive verb in possessive constructions should be seen in the light of this general tendency.

To conclude: the grammatical systems of European languages can only be properly understood if looked at in a larger typological perspective. At the same time, stressing the "exotic" features of the European or West European languages may have a positive effect on the development of linguistic theory in general in at least two ways: first, it is a necessary antidote to the pervasive European bias in all branches of linguistic research, second, it may contribute to our understanding of the ways in which "marked" grammatical constructions develop.

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