

VSO clause order and the VP: the case of Oceanic [Category: either oral or poster]

This paper examines two typologically unusual phenomena that appear to co-occur in a subset of Oceanic languages: VSO clause order, and incorporation of a phrasal object. I argue that in the relevant languages supposed ‘incorporation’ in fact involves an object NP in VP-internal complement position; that apparent object agreement suffixes are accusative clitic pronouns; and that the languages are therefore actually VOS, not VSO.

VSO languages pose several crucial typological problems for theories of grammar. One relates to the lack of adjacency between verb and object. By interposing the subject between the verb and its complement, VSO languages appear to lack a VP. Most theories of grammar posit the object as complement of V within a VP, and this is supported by typological evidence. Of the 1056 languages displaying a dominant word order surveyed by Dryer (2005), 967 (91.5%) locate the object adjacent to the verb, allowing a VP. Clause structures where S intervenes between V and O therefore require accounting for. In this respect, Austronesian languages are disproportionately significant. Of Dryer’s 1056 languages, only 85 (8.0%) are listed as VSO. However, of those, 20 (23.5%) are Austronesian, 8 of which are Oceanic. Apparent VSO structures in Oceanic are localised (and exhaustively distributed) in three subgroups: Yapese, Polynesian, and New Georgia/Isabel. These groups also display a second typologically unusual phenomenon: apparent incorporation of phrasal objects, at odds with the widely accepted generalisation that incorporated nouns may not be modified (Gerds 1998:94), whether the incorporation is morphological, or by noun stripping (Miner 1986, 1989) or juxtaposition (Mithun 1984:849-85).

In this paper I examine clause order and incorporation in Oceanic VSO languages. I look briefly at Yapese (Jensen 1977) and Polynesian (Ball 2005; Massam 2000, 2001, 2005; Pearce 2002 etc), before investigating in detail clause order and incorporation in New Georgia/Isabel languages, focussing on a case study of Hoava (Davis 2003). I present evidence that Hoava ‘incorporated’ nouns may carry a range of modifiers, be coordinated, or be possessed (1), and that they occur outside certain adverbial particles (2), all characteristics not usually associated with incorporation. I then present evidence that purported obligatory object agreement suffixes in the language are in fact weak accusative pronouns occurring in the same syntactic position as supposedly ‘incorporated’ objects (3). I conclude that in Hoava, all objects are expressed in a VP-internal complement position, with indefinite objects expressed by an NP, while definite objects are expressed by a weak clitic pronoun, optionally accompanied by an adjunct NP later in the clause if required for referent tracking. I argue that Hoava therefore resembles Chicheŵa (Bresnan & Mchombo 1987) to the extent that object doubling occurs in which an NP adjunct doubles a pronominal argument, but that the Hoava situation is more straightforward than Chicheŵa, as pronominal and lexical objects occur in the same VP-internal position.

I conclude that Hoava does display a VP, and the clause order VOS, not VSO, and that phrasal constituents are not incorporated. In these respects Hoava does not pose typological problems for which theories of grammar must account. I conclude by arguing that the situation in Hoava is widespread in supposedly VSO Oceanic languages, and that in these respects Oceanic is less typologically unusual than traditionally analysed, and poses fewer problems for theories of grammar. These languages conform to a posited universal underlying VP without the need to resort to movement or other theoretical devices to account for their surface structures.

- (1) a. hiva napo **kolo maŋini** ba rao na
want drink water be.hot EMPH I DEM
‘I want to drink hot water.’
- b. tavete **parika na tupi** eri kahike
work bow and arrow they three
‘They three made bows and arrows.’
- c. tavete **nana tupi, nana parika**
work GENPOSS.3SGParrow GENPOSS.3SGPbow
‘[He] made his arrows, his bows.’
- (2) pa vera koni vayi **velo pepeha**
LOC where FUT take usually soil
‘Where do (you) usually take soil from?’
- (3) sa h<in>abu tavete **velo=a** yamu kerane
ART <NMLZ>gather.food work usually=3SGO youPL old.days
‘the food gathering you usually did in the old days’