How word order does (not) change: Warlpiri flexible word order and contact with English

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Like many other Australian languages, Warlpiri has flexible word order, heavily influenced by information structure (Hale 1992, Simpson 2006; Swartz 1991). The exact information-structural factors are still not understood in detail and a systematic corpus study is needed to disentangle various factors. In addition, Warlpiri is under increasing pressure from contact with English, but how this affects flexible word order is still unclear (e.g. Browne 2022; O'Shannessy 2006). While previous studies point to changes towards English SVO word order, a corpus-based study on potential word order changes in all Warlpiri communities is still lacking (Bavin and Shopen 1991; O'Shannessy 2006; Simpson 2006: 508). Studies on Pitjantjatjatjara word order show that contact with English does not necessarily lead to less word order flexibility (Wilmoth et al. 2022). Typologically, very few studies on flexible word order and language change exist. Most studies on word order and language change have focused on European languages with a long written tradition and extensive documentation. However, Australian languages have no long written tradition and the majority are under-documented. This makes studying flexible word order, language contact and change in Australian languages particularly challenging, but also particularly relevant.

This talk looks at flexible word order and language change in Warlpiri, one of the best-documented Australian languages, by comparing recordings from the 1960s (Hale 1966-1967a, b) with recordings from the 2000s (Daniels 2009; Morton 2009a-e; Nelson 2009; O'Shannessy 2004a-e, 2022; Presley 2009; Ross 2009). For this purpose, the to-date largest morpho-syntactically annotated and reference-tracked corpus of Warlpiri spoken narratives has been created. It consists of 1,849 clauses and has been segmented into intonation units (Chafe 1994; Himmelmann et al. 2018), translated, glossed, and annotated with various anotation schemes including GRAID (Haig and Schnell 2014; Schiborr et al. 2018; Vollmer et al. in prep). This makes it possible to not only analyse any changes in flexible word order, but also what information-structural factors influence word order and if they have changed between the 1960s and the 2000s.

Results suggest that language change has indeed occurred, but outcomes vary across word order types and factors. Pre-verbal subjects are preferred in both datasets and no statistically significant change has occurred. Pre-verbal objects are preferred in the older timeframe, but the frequency of post-verbal objects increases over time, making the proportion of pre-verbal and post-verbal objects roughly equal in the newer timeframe. Paradoxically, then, the increase in post-verbal objects has led to an increase in word order flexibility, contrasting with English rigid word order. With regard to information-structural factors, this talk will focus on animacy and referential givenness/newness. Both factors influence word order, but with variation across word order types and time frames.

This corpus-based, usage-oriented study takes a first step towards a better understanding of flexible word order and of diachronic processes in an understudied non-European language. The results therefore have important implications for typological studies as well as language evolution.

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