

Lithuanian Word Order and Focus

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Abstract

This paper examines the flexibility of Lithuanian word order and focus as stated by Terje Matthiassen in his *A Short Grammar of Lithuanian*. The data is collected through interviewing a native Lithuanian language speaker/informant. The informant was presented a number of Lithuanian sentences, pictures, where needed, along with their contexts in order to determine the validity of the word order of those sentences. After each response, be it negative or positive, the word order of the tested sentence is jumbled again and retested to verify all the possible results.

Keywords: Lithuanian, word, order, focus, theme.

Introduction

Unlike English language, Lithuanian language is a case language in which word order does not have a grammatical function, hence it offers a variety of word order (Matthiassen, 1996). The purpose of this paper is to examine how focus is expressed through different word orders and if possible support/ refute the claim that word order in this case language is flexible.

*Word order*¹ is a term that refers to the arrangement of words in a phrase, clause, or sentence. It plays an important role in determining meaning expressed in other languages by inflections. The basic word order is SVO from which other orders are deduced (Matthiassen, 1996).

*Focus*⁵ is a term that refers to information in a sentence that is:

- New
- Of high communicative interest
- Typically occurs late in the sentence
- Complements the presupposed information typically presented early in the sentence

Example: Your books are on the *shelf*.

⁵ Glossary of Linguistics Terms

The terms *theme and rheme* comes into play when word order is discussed. These terms are believed to be the mechanisms and the principles behind word order (Matthiassen, 1996).

*Theme*⁶ is the given information which referred to as “topic” and usually occupies the initial position of the sentence.

*Rheme*² is the new information which is referred to as “comment” and usually occupies the final position of the sentence.

Example: Yesterday, I met *an old man* (rheme). *The old man* (theme) was sitting outside *a red house* (rheme).

I.

Literature review

Matthiassen 1996

- Languages without a case system like English does not offer the same possibilities for variations in word order as case language do.
- Lithuanian is a language with a case system, therefore, SVO word order is not obligatory.
- We can distinguish subject from object through the case ending. The place of subject and object in the sentence is not so vital.
- Changeable word order is not synonymous with free word order. Even though word order in Lithuanian language is changeable to a considerable degree, still it is not free in the sense that variation in word order is of no importance.
- In one object sentence, it is possible to say either *Jonas parašė laišką* (SVO) or *laišką parašė Jonas* (OVS).
- The variation in non-fictional prose is fewer in comparison to fictional prose and colloquial speech.
- The analysis will concentrate on sentences with verbal predicate rather than nominal predicate because the latter show less variation in word order.
- The neutral word order in sentences containing an object is SVO.
- The alternative (S)OV model can be close to neutral.
- OVS model is close to neutral word order
- In non-context dependent sentences the VOS and OSV are claimed to be extremely rare whereas the VSO and OVS patterns seem to be more common.

Data

Hypothesis 1

6 Matthiassen (1996)

Test which model SVO or OVS is acceptable in one object sentence in which the verb phrase is focused. Verify whether other models such as OVS, SOV, VSO are acceptable or not.

1) Context: Imagine that you just talked to your friend John on the phone. I asked you about **what he did**, you responded: “Jonas parašė laiška.”

a. “Jonas *parašė laiška*.”

‘John *wrote a letter*.FOC’

Acceptability judgment⁷

1. a. ✓Jonas parašė laiška (SVO)
2. a. #Jonas laiška parašė (SOV)
3. a. #Laiška Jonas parašė (OSV)
4. a. #Laiška parašė Jonas (OVS)
5. a. #Parašė Jonas laiška (VSO)
6. a. #Parašė laiška Jonas (VOS)

Conclusion 1

According to the informant SVO word order is acceptable in the above context whereas OVS is grammatically correct but not acceptable in this context.

Hypothesis 2

Test whether OVS model is acceptable.

2) Context: Imagine that you just talked with your friend on the phone about a letter. I asked you: “**who wrote the letter?**”, you responded: “Laiška parašė Jonas”.

b. “Laiška parašė Jonas”

‘the letter was written by *Jonas*.FOC’

Acceptability judgment

1. b. #Laiška parašė Jonas (OVS)
2. b. ✓Jonas parašė laiška (SVO)
3. b. #Jonas laiška parašė (SOV)
4. b. #Laiška Jonas parašė (OSV)
5. b. #Parašė Jonas laiška (VSO)
6. b. #Parašė laiška Jonas (VOS)

Conclusion 2

⁷ Note for acceptability judgments, a ✓ before a Lithuanian sentence means it is acceptable and a # means it is unacceptable.

OVS word order is grammatically correct, yet, it is not acceptable in this context because it sounds archaic. The preferred word order is SVO.

Hypothesis 3

In non-context dependent sentences the VOS and OSV are claimed to be extremely rare whereas the VSO and OVS patterns seem to be more common.

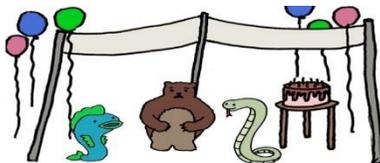
- 3) šuo įkando mergaitei
 dog bit girl.FOC
 ‘the dog bit the little girl’
- 4) mažai mergaitei įkando šuo
 little girl bit dog.FOC
 ‘the little girl was bitten by the dog’

Conclusion 3

This hypothesis supports data presented in previous literature that in a non-context dependent sentence OVS word order is acceptable, in addition to SVO.

Hypothesis 4

Using pictures to narrate a fictional story instead of asking for a direct translation from English to Lithuanian will yield to different word order. The following picture is about animal party. Look at the pictures and translate from English to Lithuanian.



- 5) gyvūnai suorganizavo vakarėlį
 animals organized.PST party.ACC
 ‘the animals organized a party’

c. The animals organized a party.

Acceptability judgment

1. c. #vakarėli suorganizavo gyvūnai (OVS)
2. c. #vakarėli gyvūnai suorganizavo (OSV)
3. c. #suorganizavo gyvūnai vakarėli (VSO)
4. c. #suorganizavo vakarėli gyvūnai (VOS)
5. c. #gyvūnai vakarėli suorganizavo (SOV)

Conclusion 4

SVO only is acceptable.

Hypothesis 5

Test whether using different focus operators will yield to different word orders.

Only as focus operator

6) Context: John was playing at the park with his friend. His mom had packed some snacks, a banana and two apples, just in case the boys wanted to eat something. After a while, each boy ate a different snack; John ate the banana. John was still hungry so he asked for more food, but his mother told him that he already ate two apples and had to wait for lunch which was going to be soon. But John's friend, knowing that John only ate the banana, corrected John's mom and said: "John ate only a banana." How can I say "John ate only a banana" in Lithuanian?

d. "Jonas suvalgė tik bananą."

Jonas	suvalgė	tik	bananą
John	ate.SG.PST	only	banana.NOM
'John ate only a banana'			

Acceptability judgment

1. d. ✓Jonas suvalgė tik bananą (SVonlyO)
2. d. #tik Jonas suvalgė bananą (onlySVO)
3. d. #Jonas tik suvalgė bananą (SonlyVO)
4. d. #Jonas suvalgė bananą tik (SVOonly)
5. d. *bananą suvalgė Jonas tik (OVonly)
6. d. tik bananą suvalgė Jonas (onlyOVS)
7. d. #bananą tik suvalgė Jonas (OonlyVS)

Conclusion

1-Sentence 2.d. is grammatically correct but not acceptable in this context because it denotes a different meaning. It is translated into English as 'only John ate the apple'.

2-Sentence 5.d. *bananą suvalgė Jonas tik (OVonly) is grammatically incorrect.

3-Sentence 6.d. tik bananą suvalgė Jonas (onlyOVS), according to the informant, is grammatically correct, yet, sounds archaic.

Not as focus operator

7) Context: John was playing at the park with his friend. His mom had packed some snacks, **a banana and two apples**, just in case the boys wanted

to eat something. After a while, each boy ate a different snack; John ate the banana. John was still hungry so he asked for more food, but his mother told him that he already ate two apples and had to wait for lunch which was going to be soon. But John's friend, knowing that John only ate the banana, corrected John's mom and said: "Jonas nevalgė obuolių."

e. Jonas nevalgė obuolių

Jonas	nevalgė	obuolių
John	not.ate.PST	apple

'John did not eat the apple'

Acceptability judgments:

1. e. #obuolių nevalgė Jonas (OVS)
2. e.# Jonas nevalgė obuolių (SOV)
3. e. ✓ nevalgė Jonas obuolių (VSO)

Conclusion

Negation yields to VSO word order

Hypothesis 6

Verify whether VSO is acceptable in negated sentences.

8) Context: In preparation for the party, the animals did not go to school. How can I say "the animals did not go to school" in Lithuanian?

f.	gyvūnai	praleido	pamokas
	animals	miss.3SG.PST	Class.DAT

'the animals did not go to school'

Conclusion 6

The Lithuanian negative word 'ne' is not suitable in this context. Therefore, 'miss' is used to express the meaning of the English phrase "did not go".



9) Context: Squirrel talking to crab: "Aš nežinojau apie vakarėlį."

g.	aš	nežinojau	apie	vakarėlį
	I.1.SG	NEG.know.3SG.PST	about	party.ACC

'I didn't know about the party'

Acceptability judgments:

- 1.g. #nežinojau aš apie vakarėlį (VSO)
- 2.g. #nežinojau apie vakarėlį aš (VOS)
- 3.g. #apie vakarėlį aš nežinojau(OSV)
- 4.g. #apie vakarėlį nežinojau aš (OVS)
- 5.g. #aš apie vakarėlį nežinojau (SOV)

Conclusion 6

VSO is not acceptable.

Conclusion

Although Matthiassen states that SVO word order is not obligatory, my data show that SVO is the most prevailing word order, thus, it is the default word order.

In terms of focus, in many occasions, my informant told me that long answers do not sound accurate as opposed to short answers in which the phrase that's under focus is provided. For example, as answer for the following question 'what does your mother bake?' the preferred answer is "pyragus" instead of saying: "Mano mama kepa pyragus."

As for not finding different word order, I am assuming the following: Matthiassen's findings are accurate in the time frame he held those tests although nothing is mentioned about the methods he applied in collecting his data and whether it is based on spoken form of language or based on written materials.

I need to interview more speakers of Lithuanian language to compare my informant's language to other varieties of Lithuanian language if there is any.

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