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CONGRUENCE LANGUAGES AND WORD ORDER

The paper considers the interdependence between word order, congruence and formal cases – the means which, together with lexical meaning and formal class markers, explicate the concrete syntactic relations in a sentence. There are languages (including the Slavic ones) in whose structure congruence is very important. They may or may not possess formal cases. Even if they have no formal cases their word order is relatively free due to the compensatory role of congruence, which is often, but not always, able to eliminate potential ambiguity in the sentence, assisted to a certain extent by animacy, definiteness, pronoun duplicates of the objects and extra-linguistic knowledge (and Modern Bulgarian is good enough to illustrate this). At the same time, even in congruence languages with formal cases there are strict word order rules. In both kinds of congruence languages the violation of these rules can make a sentence utterly unintelligible (the last is exemplified by a couple of lines from Spanish and Ukrainian poetry).

1. Topic

The interaction between word order and congruence should be considered in the broader context of the interdependence between word order, congruence, formal cases, lexical meaning, formal class markers, prosody, etc. as means to explicate the concrete syntactic relations in a sentence. In the present paper the emphasis will be put on the capability of congruence to compensate for the relatively free word order and, possibly, for the lack of formal cases in some European languages.

2. Tentative definitions

By congruence I mean any kind of formal agreement between two (or more) items in a sentence and especially between the noun and its attributes and the subject and its predicate.

Of course, other methods of approach are also possible – cf. L. Bloomfield's classification of the types of agreement in which the agreement in the "nominative expression", i.e. between nouns and their attributes, in the majority of the Indo-European languages as well as the agreement in the "actor-action construction", i.e. between the subject and the predicate, in Modern English is defined as "concord" or "congruence", while the agreement in the Latin expression puella cantat '(the) girl she-sings' is defined as "cross-reference" (Bloomfield 1970: 191–193). Such a subtle differentiation would be irrelevant to our purposes. For the same reason, I would regard the role of formal cases as essentially different from congruence, though, of course, both phenomena may be grouped together on certain grounds, as it is, for instance, in C. Lehmann's classification distinguishing between "unirelational and birelational grammatical formatives": »The most important birelational formatives are pronominal elements marking cross-reference and adverbial/adpositional elements marking case relations.« (Lehmann 2002: 154).

In general, all languages which apply congruence as a syntactic mechanism might be called congruence languages. For the time being I should confine myself to languages characterized as follows:

a) languages with well-developed agreement between the subject and the predicate;

b) languages with well-developed agreement between nouns and their attributes;

c) languages with relatively free word order;

d) languages which may or may not possess formal cases;

e) Indo-European languages indigenous to Europe.

2.1. A matter of degree

As it is with many other linguistic phenomena, it is difficult to draw an exact boundary between congruence languages and non-congruence ones. In Europe, moving from South to North and from East to West, congruence grows weaker by reason of such processes as decline of gender and decline of the personal endings of verbs. When these processes gain enough strength rules of a fixed

position of the subject and of its obligatory overt expression appear in a language. Such a language is no longer a congruence one in terms of the tentative definition just proposed – at least it does not satisfy condition (c) in it. Nevertheless, in the structure of such languages there might be some presence of agreement between the subject and the predicate (as in French and in English) or even between the noun and its attributes (larger in French, in English only with demonstrative pronouns), but it is not enough to allow for a relatively free word order and for the omission of overtly expressed subjects.

In the Romance linguistic continuum the relative boundary drawn by our definition goes through France with Occitan to the South being (unlike French proper) a typical congruence language (here it coincides with the boundary between null-subject and non-null-subject languages, or between M. Haspelmath's (2001: 1500) referential-agreement and strict-agreement languages, but elsewhere it does not).

As for the Slavonic languages, all of them are model congruence languages – most of them (but not all of them) possessing formal case systems.

3. The core of the problem

Most curious is the situation with those congruence languages which have no or almost no formal cases with the noun and yet their word order is relatively free. Linguists tend to underestimate the role of congruence as a plausible rea–son for such a situation. And this is so even with representatives of structural linguistics and language typology who examine functional sentence perspective and, on that account, are most intimate with the empirical facts.

The last could be illustrated by the speculations of P. Sgall, E. Hajičková and E. Buráňová (1980: 142–149) about the typological characteristics of functional sentence perspective (called "topic/comment articulation" in the English summary of their book – ibid.: 154). The authors note that, concerning word order, there are significant distinctions between the languages in Western Europe characterized by isolating (analytic) typological features – in English and French functional sentence perspective is marked mainly by intonation and grammatical constructions, while in Spanish and German word order is relatively free (and closer to word order in the Slavonic languages) and it serves to express functional sentence perspective. It is interesting that the only reason for such a freedom of word order, mentioned by the authors, is the capability of Spanish to mark the animate direct object through the preposition *a* (Sgall, Hajičová, Buráňová 1980: 146–147), i.e. free word order is explained through the exi-

stence of a construction similar to formal cases[1] and not through the presence of congruence.

Modern Bulgarian data prove that a prepositional marker for the direct object is not indispensable for a language without cases to have a relatively free word order.

4. Occitan personal endings

The personal endings of Occitan verbs prove the importance of congruence for some languages and demonstrate its capability to violate their phonetic rules.

In most varieties of Occitan certain consonants are mute in word-final position. Thus the final -*n* is mute in Languedocien and the final -*s* is very often mute in Provençal[2], but in both varieties final -*n* and -*s*, and all final consonants, are pronounced if they are a part of the personal ending of a verb, cf. the forms of the present indicative where the final -*s* and -*n* (as well as final -*m* and -*tz*) are always pronounced and never mute:

parli, parla**s**, parla, parlam, parlatz, parla**n**[3]

5. Placing the verb before the subject and the object before the verb

The relative freedom of word order in congruence languages which have no cases with the noun is usually realized through the possibility to place the verb before the subject and the object before the verb. Generally speaking, this linear mobility of the parts of the sentence may serve functional sentence perspective, but its rules, constrains and motivation may be quite complicated and, of course, language-specific. It may be connected with semantic or pragmatic factors, with definiteness, referentiality, animacy, emphasis, contrast, transitivity[4] and, after all, with the existence of specific non-emphatic variants of basic word order in every language.

A simple example from Catalan – a language closely related to Occitan – may be provided:

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[1] The chain of causation is rather the opposite: the construction with the preposition *a* began to mark the animate direct object because there was a relatively free word order, and it was not the free word order which appeared because a special construction to mark the direct object already existed. There is a similar construction – with the preposition *pe* – in Rumanian, too.

[2] Cf. Pronóncia_de_l'occitan.

[3] Example from Occitan_conjugation.

[4] For an example of a recent concrete investigation cf. Popova (2012: 115–168).

Vint-i-un anys té el meu cosí i trenta-tres la meva cosina

'twenty-one years has the my cousin(m) and thirty-three the my cousin(f)'

This sentence, taken from a textbook[5], displays a word order – OVS, used twice – which is very frequent, though not basic, in the case-less congruence languages in Europe (the basic word order in Catalan is SVO). Though the four noun phrases are not formally marked for case, there is no ambiguity concerning the distinction between the subjects and the direct objects in it for one basic and one additional reason. The basic reason is the different formal class, i.e. different number of the noun phrases – two of them (*el meu cosí* and *la meva cosina*) are in the singular and the verb (*té*), which is also in the singular, agrees with them, while the other two noun phrases share a common head (*anys*) which is in the plural and does not agree with the verb, so *el meu cosí* and *la meva cosina* are the subjects in this sentence and the rest of the noun phrases are direct objects in it.

The additional reason is that *el meu cosí* and *la meva cosina* are animate, while the phrases denoting number of years are not. The verb in the sentence is a verb of possession and it is more than natural that the animate noun phrases (and not the inanimate) should be its subjects.

So congruence is the decisive formal mechanism to denote the syntactic relations in this sentence, while animacy (as a part of the lexical meaning of the noun phrase heads) is a subsidiary one.

The frequent use of OVS word order conditions an even more frequent use of VS order in sentences with intransitive verbs, since there is no danger of case ambiguity in them.

In this respect we may agree with A. Mel'ničuk's statement that the initial (and pre-subject) position of the verb in sentences like the Russian *Сделалась суматоха*; *Надвигалась гроза*; *Дошли слухи*; *Глянули Звезды* (Mel'ničuk 1958: 51) is an all-Slavonic word order pattern.

Bulgarian is no exception to this pattern. VS order is something usual, especially in relatively short (and non-emphatic) sentences with intransitive verbs:

Viž, pristignaha našite prijateli!

'look, came the-our friends'

Zaduha silen vjatăr.

'began-to-blow strong wind'

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5   Poch, Yates (2004: 27). Further in the same book the sentence is mentioned as an example of the possibility to place the verb before the subject in Catalan (ibid. 57).

In most cases these are sentences with weak information structure segmentation – they express only new information and the position of the verb in them is defined rather by rules of linear hierarchy of the parts of the (intransitive) sentence than by factors connected with functional sentence perspective. Perhaps this kind of word order is a phenomenon standing closer to basic word order (basic constituent order) than to the means to contrast theme with rheme in a sentence, and we may state with certainty that it stands out of the means to express its topic or its focus, if we employ the terms theme, rheme, topic and focus in the sense they are used by C. Lehmann (2002: 100–107), i.e. if we consider the topic and the focus as emphatic forms of the theme and the rheme.

6. Ability of congruence to compensate free word order in languages with no cases

A principal problem in languages combining a relatively free word order with a lack of formal cases with the noun is how to distinguish between the subject and the object of a verb. Although congruence is a mighty instrument of avoiding ambiguity it is often helpless to solve the problem by itself, so it interacts with other formal techniques and semantic factors in the sentence (and with cognitive factors out of the sentence).

If we consider Bulgarian, even without special emphasis the sentences with transitive verbs can change their word order according to the requirements of functional sentence perspective. Though passive constructions are possible and even preferable in the highest style, the language, especially the colloquial one, makes intensive use of non-passive (and non-emphatic) sentences with OVS word order (the basic word order being SVO). In such sentences several factors[6] – formal, semantic and cognitive – interact to clear up the ambiguity about "who is who" concerning the formal subject and the formal direct object in a sentence, but, unfortunately, all of them act under certain restrictions:

a) agreement in number and (with many verbal forms) in gender between the subject and the predicate (it can be effective in distinguishing between the subject and the object only if their word-class affiliation is different, i.e. if they differ in number and in gender);

b) a pronoun duplicate of the object[7] – the so called "doubled object, udvoeno dopălnenie" (it is almost obligatory when the object is a theme and at the

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[6] According to S. Ivančev (1978: 167–172) such factors are word order, logical stress, animacy, definiteness, a pronoun duplicate of the object.

[7] The relations between the usage of pronoun duplicates of the object, definiteness, logical stress and functional sentence perspective is analysed in considerable detail by Ivančev (1978: 128–152).

same time definite or individualized – these are the conditions under which, in S. Ivančev's opinion, it is absolutely obligatory in colloquial Bulgarian (Ivančev 1978: 137–142); the pretentious style tends to avoid constructions with pronoun duplicates of the objects);

c) the lexical meaning of the subject and the object (especially their animacy, provided one of them is animate and the other is not);

d) our knowledge about the items denoted by the nouns in a sentence, about their characteristics, typical behaviour and inherent activities (unfortunately, this mechanism does not solve the problem if the designata of the subject and the object share similar extra-linguistic characteristics).

I have not included definiteness in the list. It is true that subjects are usually definite or individualized, but this is rather a statistic than a principal characteristic of theirs and, for this reason, it can help in distinguishing between subjects and objects only to a certain extent. It might have held true in respect of thematic subjects if there were not counter-examples of non-definite and non-individualized thematic subjects (used in their generic meaning) in sentences like:

Istinska kotka njama da skoči văv vodata.

'genuine cat will-not jump into the-water'

Istinska kotka njama da jade zelenčuci.

'genuine cat will-not eat vegetables'

When the noun phrases in a sentence differ in number there is no ambiguity about their being a subject or a direct object, since it is the subject which agrees in number with the verb. With a lot of verbal categories the subject and the predicate agree also in gender and then the different gender of the noun phrases may also help. In such cases congruence is an unequivocal instrument of pointing to the subject of a sentence. And it happens to be the only formal marker of the subject when there are no other formal or semantic differences between the nominal items, cf. the following sentence in which both nouns (except for the circumstantial phrase) are indefinite and animate:

Dete v džunglata otkriha vojnici.

'child in the-jungle found(pl) soldiers'

Here the plural form of the verb unequivocally marks *vojnici* as the subject of the sentence just as the singular form of the verb in the next example unmistakably points to *dete* being the subject:

Vojnici v džunglata otkri dete.

'soldiers in the-jungle found(sg) child'

Both sentences have OVS word order and both have subjects specified only by congruence. Nevertheless, quite often congruence is reinforced by other formal or semantic factors; thus contrast in number may be reinforced by contrast in definiteness, as in (a), by contrast in animacy, as in (b), or by contrast in definiteness and animacy simultaneously, as in (c):

(a) Dobra sekretarka šte namerjat pomoštnicite mi.

'good secretary(f) will find(pl) the-assistants my'

(b) Stranen kamăk otkriha učenici izvăn grada.

'stange stone found(pl) pupils out-of the-town'

(c) Dobro săčinenie napisaha učenicite predi Koleda.

'good composition wrote(pl) the-pupils before Christmas'

The three sentences have the OVS order, their subjects and their verbs are in the plural and their direct objects, which are the initial noun phrases in them, are in the singular – undoubtedly they are not subjects because they do not agree with the verb. Still, in (a) the object *dobra sekretarka* is indefinite (unlike the subject *pomoštnicite mi*), in (b) the object *stranen kamăk* is inanimate (unlike the subject *učenici*, both are indefinite) and in (c) the object *dobro săčinenie* is neither definite nor animate, while the subject *učenicite* is either. In contrast to a definite and animate subject the indefinite and inanimate noun phrases are quite plausible direct objects, so in such sentences animacy and definiteness serve as a kind of markers of the parts of the sentence subsidiary to congruence.

7. On the verge of ambiguity

When congruence is unable to distinguish between subject and direct object because of their equal word class characteristics (i.e. equal number and gender), the subsidiary means to solve the problem become the only ones available. And we should give prominence to the fact that their reliability is but relative.

First of all, it should be noted that there are (non-emphatic) sentences syntactically ambiguous, or almost ambiguous, by nature. Their subjects and direct objects share no contrastive characteristics relevant to their distinction. This applies to a great extent to sentences with noun phrases which are neither definite nor individualized – usually no pronoun duplicates of the object, which are the last opportunity to avoid ambiguity, appear in such sentences, as it is in:

Kotki podgoniha kučeta.

'cats dashed-after(pl) dogs'

The sentence is equivocal because it may either contain a thematic subject and a rhematic object or, vice versa, a thematic object and a rhematic subject.

Sentences like *Kotki podgoniha kučeta* may have the neutral theme-rheme or the reverse rheme-theme sequence of functional sentence perspective constituents, they may or may not have pitch and stress prominent topics or foci or any other kind of emphasis but, independent of their intonation or information structure peculiarities, their syntactic structure is equivocal – both nouns in them share the same formal and similar semantic characteristics (both are plural and animate) and either may be the subject or the direct object because it is not clear which of them the predicate agrees with. This leads to an almost fatal semantic ambiguity – we are not sure whether cats chase dogs or vice versa.

How does the concrete language cope with such a structural imperfection? Why does it not adopt a fixed order of the principal parts of the sentence, grammaticalizing the theme into a subject?

It is difficult to say. Perhaps such sentences are used on rare occasions and their statistic significance is not so great as to evoke structural changes in language and, in particular, to fix the order of their basic syntactic constituents or to make the use of passive constructions obligatory. Perhaps in real speech they are not semantically ambiguous thanks to the wider context of the discourse they are involved in. As for the topic we are interested in, it is important to note that in languages like Bulgarian congruence is the most reliable means to disambiguate the basic syntactic relations in a sentence provided the subject and the direct object differ in number and, under certain conditions, in gender. With certain precaution we may describe all other means as subsidiary to congruence.

8. The pronoun duplicate of the object

The employment of a pronoun duplicate of the object is also a subsidiary instrument of disambiguating the formal structure of a sentence for several reasons. First, the prescriptive stylistics in Bulgarian – as far as it exists in some form or another – shuns this syntactic technique. Usually, institutionalized grammars describe it as inherent to colloquial speech and even to dialects[8], which makes teachers, proof-readers and editors be overzealous and not allow it into written texts. As a result practically no Bulgarian was taught to use it at school and she or he would readily omit a pronoun duplicate of an object in pursuit of a more bookish (or more "refined") style. But there is another, much more

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[8] As, for instance, K. Popov and E. Georgieva do in Sintaksis (1983: 186–188, 282–283).

important, reason. As it was already mentioned, it is widely accepted that in colloquial Bulgarian the usage of a pronoun duplicate of the object is obligatory if the object is the theme in a sentence and if it is definite or individualized. But optionally we could double the rhematic object as well, and the pronoun clitic would equally stand before the verb no matter whether the object is a thematic or a rhematic one. So we could equally well say

Dărvetata gi izseče brat mi.

'the-trees them cut(sg) brother my', i.e. 'The trees were cut by my brother.'

and

Brat mi gi izseče dărvetata.

'brother my them cut the-trees', i.e. 'My brother cut the trees.'

Formally both sentences differ only in word order. If there is no falling intonation on the initial noun, i.e. if their information constituents order is theme-rheme, their functional perspective will combine with their syntactic structure in two distinct ways – the first sentence will have a thematic object while the second one will have a thematic subject, and that is why their translation into English will be different as shown above. Some colleagues (i.e. people who know what syntax and functional sentence perspective is) insist on both sentences containing only a thematic object – when I discussed the examples with them they said that the second sentence is possible only with a sentence-initial falling intonation and, hence, with an inverse rheme-theme consequence. This is an important native speaker's observation indicative of the complexity of the relations between word order, sentence intonation, functional sentence perspective and usage of a pronoun duplicate of the object in contemporary Bulgarian. I still think that the sentence *Brat mi gi izseče dărvetata* can be pronounced with a sentence-final falling tone (and hence it would contain a sentence-final rhematic object doubled by a pre-verbal pronoun clitic) although this might be a less typical and somewhat controversial case. It can safely be said that the same sentence can be pronounced with an intonation climax on the verb (as if it answers a question *What did your brother do with the trees?*), then its English translation – *My brother cut the trees* – would also have the falling tone on the verb.

In any case, if we assume that the pronoun duplicate of an object marks predominantly its being a thematic one, in practice other – mainly semantic – factors help further disambiguation of the sentence. Thus the important difference in sense between the following two sentences is rendered by the contrast between the third person singular dative masculine pronoun clitic *mu* and the singular dative reflexive pronoun clitic *si* coming (in their possessive function)

after the noun *brat* – this contrast may possibly (but not necessarily) be assisted by differences in intonation:

Ivan go izlăga brat mu.

'Ivan him deceived(sg) brother his', i.e. 'Ivan was deceived by his brother.'

Ivan go izlăga brat si

'Ivan him deceived(sg) brother his(refl)' , i.e. 'Ivan deceived his brother.'

It should be noted that the clitic *go* is present in pre-verbal position in both sentences, so it has no distinctive functions concerning their semantic contrast. In the first sentence it refers to (it doubles) *Ivan* and in the second one it refers to and "doubles" Ivan's brother, but nothing in its form signals this difference.

Here is another example:

Kăštata ja prodade bankata.

'the-house it sold(sg) the-bank', i.e. (most probably) 'The house was sold by the bank.'

In this case we have a sentence with a transitive verb in the singular (*prodade*), two definite inanimate feminine nouns (*kăštata* and *bankata*) in the singular and an accusative feminine pronoun clitic in the singular (*ja*), which may refer to either noun. The verb, on its part, may also agree with either noun. The main reason to decide that *bankata* ('the-bank') is the syntactic subject and hence the semantic agent in the sentence is our extra-linguistic knowledge that usually banks sell houses and not vice versa.

9. Conscious play with ambiguity

An ample proof that the native speakers of Bulgarian are conscious of the ambiguity their language allows for is the usage of equivocal titles in the Bulgarian press, such as:

"Kon otkradna ciganin"

'horse stole Gipsy'

or

"Mečka ubi germanec"

'bear killed German'

In these sentences we have two equally animate and equally indefinite nouns in the singular, symmetrically surrounding a verb which is also in the singular – a typical case of inherently equivocal sentences, consciously searched for by the journalists for the purpose of irony. The only key to their disambiguation is

our extra-linguistic knowledge. Just because we know that horses usually don't steal and that foreigners come to Bulgaria on hunting tourism we hope that it was the Gipsy who stole the horse and the German who shot down the bear, although the opposite might also be expected.

10. Even in congruence languages with formal cases there are strict word order rules

There is another characteristic of congruence languages which, well-known as it is, should be mentioned: as a matter of fact, the freedom of word order in congruence languages is quite limited. In practice it concerns mainly the parts of the sentence immediately connected with the verb: they may change their linear position – with a lot of restrictions – for the purposes of functional sentence perspective.

There are strict word-order rules not only in the case-less congruence languages but also in the congruence languages with a well developed system of formal cases. Croatian word order rules, as analysed in detail by J. Silić and I. Pranjković (2005: 363–374), are an illustrative example of this. Very strict and language-specific is the order of clitics, cf. for instance the considerable differences between Czech and Bulgarian in this respect, recently demostrated by L. Uhlířova (2011).

The linguistic convention (including word order rules) is less binding in poetry. Nevertheless, if we take a short fragment of a poetic text – a clause or a part of a clause – in any congruence language and dislocate its words at random, we shall obtain a thoroughly unintelligible sequence. This can be illustrated by the following part of a clause from verses in Spanish (a congruence language with no cases with the noun) and a clause from verses in Ukrainian (a congruence language with an all-Slavic system of seven nominal cases):

Cultivo una rosa blanca, En julio como en enero (José Martí)

'I-cultivate a rose white, In July as in January'

І блідий місяць на ту пору Із хмари де-де виглядав (Taras Ševčenko)

 'And pale moon at that time From clouds hardly peeped'

After a random dislocation of their words the fragments may be transformed into pointless strings of lexical items with endings inappropriate for the respective place in the string:

En Cultivo como una julio blanca en rosa enero

'In I-cultivate as a July white in rose January'

Виглядав Із пору ту місяць і блідий на де-де хмари

'peeped From time that moon And pale at hardly clouds'

The clauses have become unintelligible because the words in them are improperly arranged: attributes, adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions are dissevered from the words or phrases they modify or are simply related to. It is significant that the Ukrainian clause, when disarranged, sounds more unintelligible than the Spanish one and much more unintelligible than its own word-for-word English translation – the complex Ukrainian morphology determines a higher degree of inappropriateness of forms occurring in a wrong place in a sentence. It turns out that the abundance of morphological cases does not help when word order rules are violated.

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Sročnosni jezici i red riječi

Sažetak

U članku se razmatra međuovisnost reda riječi, sročnosti i formalnih padeža, sredstava kojima se, zajedno s leksičkim značenjem i formalnim označivačima vrsta, objašnjavaju sintaktički odnosi u rečenici. Postoje jezici (uključujući slavenske) u čijoj je strukturi sročnost vrlo važna. Iako nemaju formalnih padeža, red riječi u tim jezicima relativno je slobodan zbog nadoknađujuće uloge sročnosti, koja često, ali ne uvijek, može eliminirati potencijalnu dvoznačnost u rečenici (suvremeni bugarski ilustrira to dovoljno dobro). U isto vrijeme čak i u sročnosnim jezicima s formalnim padežima postoje stroga pravila reda riječi. U objema vrstama sročnosnih jezika kršenje tih pravila može uzrokovati potpunu nerazumljivost rečenice (što se pokazuje s nekoliko primjera iz španjolske i ukrajinske poezije).

Key words: syntax, compensatory role of congruence, word order, functional sentence perspective, parts of the sentence.

Ključne riječi: sintaksa, kompenzacijska uloga sročnosti, red riječi, funkcionalistički pogled na rečenicu, dijelovi rečenice