

Tocharian object clitics and the derivation of SOV

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The postverbal object pronouns of the Tocharian languages (Tocharian A and B: Krause & Thomas 1960, Pinault 2008; henceforth “Tocharian”) present an apparent counterexample to Greenberg’s Universal 25, which states that “if the pronominal object follows the verb, so does the nominal object” (Greenberg 1963/2007, 73). Tocharian is an SOV language in which full DP arguments precede the verb in unmarked clauses; pronominal direct and indirect objects, however, are obligatorily right-adjacent to and enclitic on the verb. Although the Tocharian object clitics meet the criteria for treatment as syntactic clitics (Zwicky 1977’s “special clitics”) within Roberts 2010’s theory of syntactic head movement, this theory generates Universal 25 as a strong prediction (Roberts 2010 p. 63), and so the Tocharian clitics are theoretically as well as typologically anomalous. Post-syntactic postpositioning of underlyingly preverbal object clitics by a phonological operation like Halpern 1995’s Prosodic Inversion (ala the treatment of second-position clitics in Vedic Sanskrit and Warlpiri in Hale 1996 and Legate 2008, respectively) could salvage Tocharian for the theory, but only in an ad hoc fashion: the existence of proclitic preverbs in Tocharian rules out a general constraint against preverbal attachment of prosodically weak elements. This paper instead proposes a strictly syntactic analysis of the Tocharian object enclitics within Roberts 2010’s head movement framework that directly relates their surface position to the independently observable structure of the Tocharian clause. Tocharian’s postverbal object clitics, default SOV word order, and flexible “discourse configurationality” all receive a unified explanation in terms of obligatory leftward movement of DP arguments into positions in an articulated left periphery (Rizzi 1997) and over a verb moved into a low C position above the usual landing site for object clitics.

The independent necessity of a movement analysis of Tocharian SOV word order furnishes the key to the puzzle of its postverbal object clitics. Although Tocharian’s object-verb ordering and postpositional “secondary cases” together suggest head-final phrase structure and thus a base-generation treatment of SOV, closer inspection reveals a preponderance of head-initial structures—clause-initial complementizers, right-branching articulated DPs (cf. Svenonius 2008), sporadic prepositional Ps, and SONegV word order of VP-negated clauses (cf. Koopman 2005, Whitman 2005), all difficult or impossible to derive from head-final base structures by movement—that together suggest that head-initial order is basic and SOV order results from DP movement. This movement can be motivated by treating Tocharian DPs as obligatorily raised into left-peripheral Topic and Focus projections: SOV order is the default case of the same discourse-driven XP movement that also generates Tocharian’s occasional “scrambling” word order patterns. Assuming that the anaphoric and quantificational features targeted by such CP-domain probes are only found on projections of D and that object clitics are mere bundles of ϕ -features lacking a categorial D feature (Mavrogiorgos 2007’s ϕ -pronouns, Roberts 2010’s defective ϕ -AGREE goals), the systematic failure of the latter to raise is as predicted: object clitic ϕ -bundles are not targeted by the CP-domain

triggers of DP movement, solely by the ϕ -probe on v^* , and so they fail to undergo the same left-peripheral movement as full DPs. Object clitics in Tocharian thus contrast minimally with those in (e.g.) Hittite, another older Indo-European language with default SOV word order, wherein clitic pronouns possess an additional D feature and so obligatorily raise into a Topic position in the left periphery—exactly the contrast we expect on the assumption that “feature loss is a natural mechanism of [syntactic] change” (Roberts 2010 p. 74) and that Hittite is more representative of the archaic Indo-European state of affairs common to both languages’ prehistories.

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