



HAL
open science

Stability and flexibility of word order in East Greenlandic Tunumiisut

Nicole Tersis, Shirley Carter-Thomas

► **To cite this version:**

Nicole Tersis, Shirley Carter-Thomas. Stability and flexibility of word order in East Greenlandic Tunumiisut. Colloque "Crisis and stability", Dec 2004, INALCO, Paris, France. halshs-00285592

HAL Id: halshs-00285592

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00285592>

Submitted on 5 Jun 2008

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Stability and flexibility of word order in East Greenlandic Tunumiisut¹

Nicole Tersis*

Shirley Carter-Thomas **

Languages vary in the degree of word order flexibility allowed. In morphologically poor languages like English, word order may often be the only clue to grammatical relations: “*John hit James*” Vs “*James hit John*”. Such languages are considered as having a constrained or fixed word order. On the other hand in languages possessing a complex rich morphology, such as those of the Inuit continuum, where grammatical relations are expressed through case markers and agreement, potential for word order variation is consequently high.

Eskimo languages have generally been characterized as SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) languages, with this configuration representing a “clearly dominant pragmatically neutral ordering pattern” (Fortescue 1993: 267). The goal of this article will be to evaluate the relative stability or flexibility of this pattern in Tunumiisut. We will discuss to what extent the theoretical potential for word order variation is exploited and the motivations for the different word order arrangements adopted.

1. Identifying a basic word order

Establishing a basic sentential ordering for a language such as Tunumiisut is, however, complex. When one speaks about a basic word order, it is generally in relation to sentences with constituents expressed by nouns or noun phrases (NP). In Tunumiisut this is often

* Celia, UMR 8133, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique & Inalco, Paris

** Institut National des Télécommunications, Evry

& Lattice, UMR 8094 Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris

¹ For a fuller account of many of the concepts proposed in this article the reader is invited to refer to Tersis & Carter-Thomas (2005).

not the case. The verbal predicate containing obligatory participant reference can alone constitute a sentence. Two central types of construction exist. In the first, the verb denoted by *-wu-* or *-pu-*, is followed by the pronominal affix signaling a unique core participant:

1. *nii-wu-a*²
eat-indic-1sg
“I am eating”

In the second, the verb denoted by *-wa-* or *-pa-* contains a portmanteau affix signaling two core participants, referring thus to the agent and patient of the clause:

2. *taki-wa-qput*
see-indic-1pl.3sg
“We are seeing him”

Referring to a basic word-order pattern in the absence of overt lexical participants can be considered to some extent artificial (Mithun 1992). On the other hand, even in clauses with no NP participants an analysis of the co-textual and contextual environment enables an evaluation of the underlying pragmatic structure and limiting the discussion to only examples containing all nominal arguments thus seems needlessly reductionist.

The identification of the grammatical functions of lexical NP participants in both types of construction, however, also poses a number of problems and has been discussed by several authors (Bok-Bennema 1991, Nowak 2000, Woodbury 1977). In what we will call the ‘intransitive’ construction, an SV or S-iO-V order usually applies. The indirect complement is signaled by *-mi* :

3. *miqsiqtig* *niqi-mi* *nii-wu-q*
child.absolutive.sg meat-iO eat-indic-3sg

² The phonemic system of Tunumiisut possesses three vowels: i, a, u and ten consonants: p, t, s, k, q, w, y, m, n, ng. There is no phonemic distinction between voiced and voiceless consonants. The voiceless stops, p, t, k and q, are pronounced as voiced and spirant consonants between vowels and are softened or elided in final position.

discourse', where he found between 5% and 20% of non-neutral clausal orderings. In the subordinate clauses, word order appeared particularly stable, as we noted no examples of non-neutral orderings. The breakdown of the 90 main clauses displaying some form of SOV ordering is shown below.

Table 1 - Breakdown of neutral constituent orderings

Neutral SOV configurations: of which:	90 main clauses
SO/iOV	6
SV	34
O/iOV	16
CV	9
V (with obligatory inflectional participant references)	25

The preferred clauses in the text would seem to be those that contain only one nominal argument: SV or O/iOV. There are only six cases where the full canonical SOV ordering is respected (cf. Du Bois 1987). In one third of the clauses lexical arguments of the predicate are absent altogether, with either the complex predicate occurring alone or preceded by an circumstantial adverbial expression. In the following section we will examine these various cases in context to determine how pragmatic parameters interact with what we have considered as these 'neutral' ordering patterns.

3. Constituent ordering and pragmatic parameters

3.1 General principles

A description of word order phenomena in terms of pragmatic criteria enables us to focus on the relationship between order and speaker-hearer interaction, and the means whereby speakers can orient the listener's interpretation. We will adopt a general conception of the topic/comment pairing where the *topic* as 'what the utterance is about' can be seen to link up with information the speaker can assume the hearer is aware of, in opposition to information the speaker is presenting as new relative to this topic, the *comment* (cf. for example,

Gundel & al 1997, Carter-Thomas 2000). It is important also to note that in this conception of topicality, the topic is not necessarily an already established discourse entity that has been mentioned in the preceding clauses. Although topics are typically ‘non-new’, in order to be understood as topic, it can be sufficient for the referent denoted to be merely accessible in the discourse environment.

Consider the following example, taken from the beginning of the oral account we analyzed:

5. <i>Tasiitaaq</i>	<i>tuusinit</i>	<i>missa-a-ni</i>	<i>ii-qaq-pu-q</i>
Tasiilaq	<u>thousand.pl</u>	<u>around-3sg-iO</u>	person-exist-indic-3sg
S	iO		V

“Tasiilaq has around a thousand inhabitants .” (Text n°1)

The speaker has just been asked to describe her hometown and its surroundings. The explicitly stated proper noun *Tasiilaq* can therefore be understood as the topic. In relation to this the speaker provides information concerning the number of inhabitants in the town, the comment. The relational division into given and new (or presupposition and assertion in the terms of Lambrecht (1994)) enables us to analyze the linguistic representation of a proposition, where X is given in relation to Y, and Y new in relation to X. In example (5), the information conveyed by the comment or rheme is not strictly new in itself but is presented as new or newsworthy in relation to Tasiidaq, the topic of the clause.

3.2 Continuing topics

When a topic has already been established, the morpheme integrated into the verbal predicate can be sufficient to show continuation of the same topic. Consider the following sequence. In 6a, the ‘new’ information constituting the comment gains its newsworthy status though its association with subject group presented as topic:

6a. <i>aamma inuusuttut amiqtakkaayuut</i>	<i>kita-a-ni</i>
and <u>young.pl many.pl</u>	west-3sg-loc

aattaq-ta-tiq-pu-t
leave-hab-inchoat-indic-3pl
V

“and many young have begun to leave for the west,

6b. *suuqtu* *itinia-ayaq-tik-sat-tu-tit*
for example study-go-inchoat-prox-part-3corefpl
DV

for example they are going to study.” (Text n°94-95)

What is newsworthy is the fact that the exodus to the west concerns the young people in question. However, in the subsequent dependent clause (6b), this topic is not formally expressed again as a separate item. It has already been established as topic and the obligatory integration of the pronominal agent to the predicate is sufficient to indicate the continuation of the topic.

Continuing pronominal topics, whether affixed to predicate as in 6b above or expressed lexically as is the case in English, are considered as a “cognitively preferred topic type” (Lambrecht 1994:172). Their identification requires only a minimal cognitive effort on the part of the receiver, in addition to the effort necessary to interpreting the comment concerning them. The position of such pronominal affixes within the Inuit clause is absolutely fixed (the morpheme signaling the co-referentiality with an already active participant, *tit* in 6b, being placed at the end of the predicate complex, cf. Fortescue 1991), unlike that of full lexical arguments whose position is theoretically variable.

Other clauses containing no overt lexical arguments include certain thetic propositions such as (7b), in which the topic remains merely implicit:

7a. *tiitiqitaa-mi* *nayungaqaqtit* *amiqtaniit* *piniaqtu-ut-pu-t*
Tiilerilaaq-loc inhabitant.pl many.pl hunter-be.pl-indic-3pl

C	S	V
Topic	Comment	

“In Tiilerilaaq most inhabitants are hunters,

7b. *kisiat aamma pisiniaqpi-qaq-pu-q*

but also shop-exist-indic-3sg

V

Comment →

but there’s also a shop...”

The circumstantial group, *tiitiqitaa-mi* has already been established as topic. The complete predicate group in 7b (including the incorporated nominal) provides information about this location and is thus interpreted as comment. Such clauses can thus be considered as displaying an implicit topic-comment movement.

3.3. Stability in constituent orderings

a) SV / SiOV orderings

In the great majority of clauses examined containing lexicalized participants the rightward topic/comment order is apparent. The topic appears towards the beginning of the clause with newsworthy information concerning the topic consistently presented towards the end of the main clause. In the case of intransitive clauses displaying either an SV or SiOV configuration, the topic will often coincide with the lexicalized subject:

8a. <i>kuumiit</i>	<i>piniaqpi-ngissaak-kaayuk</i>
Kuumiit	place for hunting-be good-intensive.sg
S	V
Topic	Comment

“Kuumiit is a good place for hunting

8b. *aamma nunata-a atian-naak-kaayuk*

and	landscape-3sg	be nice-estimation-intensive.sg
	S	V
	Topic	Comment

and its landscape is nice.” (Text n°19-20)

In (8a) the proper noun *Kuumiit*, which has already been mentioned in the preceding text and is thus easily accessible for the listener, is the topic and the information conveyed via the complex predicate provides information about it. Likewise in (8b) the grammatical subject provides the topical anchorage with information concerning it once again being conveyed by the predicate group.

In the case of intransitive clauses that also contain an indirect complement, it is the initially occurring subject group which serves as topic, with the indirect complement and predicate providing the comment:

9. <i>asimiugaqpiit</i>	<i>qani-niqsa-a</i>	<i>ikkatti-mi</i>
surrounding village.pl	be close-most-3sg	Ikkateq-iO
S		iO

ati-qaq-pu-q
name-exist-indic-3sg
V

“The nearest of the surrounding villages is called Ikkateq.” (Text n°3)

The speaker has just given some information about her hometown *Tasiilaq* and is now moving on to a description of the surrounding villages. In (9) the subject group clearly plays a topical role with the newsworthy information conveyed by the verb *atiqaq* (literally “to have as name”) and its associated indirect complement thus identifying the closest neighboring village.

b) OV / SOV orderings

Only 22 of the 103 the main clauses in our case study contained transitively inflected verbs⁴. The majority of these contain only an overt lexical object. In such clauses, in our text, this constituent plays a topical role. In (10) for example, the information conveyed by the object *tamaasa* refers back to the enumeration of various plants and seafood introduced in the preceding clause:

10. <i>tamaasa</i>	<i>nattaaq-ngi-sinnaa-ta-ut</i>	<i>tamaasa,</i>
everything	<u>find-const-can-result-1pl</u>	everything
O		O
Topic		

nii-taq-pa-qput
eat-hab-indic-1pl.3pl
V
Comment

“Everything, everything that we can find we eat.” (Text n° 75)

Similarly in (11), another case involving an OV configuration, it is the lexicalized object that serves as topic:

11. <i>aamma</i>	<i>ta-akkuat</i>	<i>nii-taq-pa-qput</i>
and	anaph-those.pl	eat-hab-indic-1pl.3pl
	O	V
	Topic	Comment

“and those we were speaking about, we are used to eating them.” (Text n°71)

The speaker has been describing the various different plants and herbs that can be found in the countryside around her hometown. The object of the verbal predicate in (11) refers back to one of these plants.

⁴ This small proportion could partly be due to the specificity of our small data set and to the speaker’s personal preferences. However, the figures are confirmed by the analyses of others linguists, including Berge (1997) and Allen and Schröder (2003), who have also noted the comparative rarity of transitive constructions in Inuit speech. According to Hagège (2001) the import of transitivity should be relativised in oral discourse in general.

The anaphoric particle *ta-* before the deictic *akkuat* explicitly signals the given and topical status of this item. What is presented as newsworthy in relation to this topic is the comestible nature of the plant. The pragmatic order is still therefore topic-comment.

In the case however of a transitive construction, accompanied by both lexical subject and object groups, it is still the lexical object in the unmarked case that is presented as topic. The topic-comment-order is thus reversed. In (12), the airport *mittaqpik* has already been presented as topic in the preceding clauses. It is, on the contrary, *amiiqikkaqmiit* “the Americans”, which is presented as newsworthy in relation to this already established ‘matter of current concern’:

12. <i>amiiqikkaqmiit</i>	<i>mittaqpik</i>	<i>aaqqissii-nikuu-wa-at</i>
American.pl	airport.sg	build-past-indic-3pl.3sg
S	O	V
Comment	Topic	
<i>aamma</i>	<i>suqsunigsuaq-mingngaaniit</i>	<i>uppa</i>
also	big war-since	maybe
	C	

“The airport, the Americans built it also since the world war maybe.”
(Text n° 47)

The choice between an intransitive or transitive verb would therefore appear to have a crucial impact on pragmatic interpretation and outweigh in this instance factors related to the rightward topic-comment movement previously discussed in the intransitive clause (cf. Mithun & Chafe 1999, for a discussion of related factors in Yup’ik). Whereas indirect complements and circumstantial elements will often, due in part to their more peripheral status, be presented as new information and occur as ‘comment’, the object of the transitive clause would seem in Tunumiisut to be a prime candidate for topichood⁵.

⁵ Berge (1997) also notes a strong correlation between direct objects and topics in Western Greenlandic.

13b. *uttut tamangayaasa danmaqki-minggaaniit*
day.pl almost all.pl Denmark-from
C C

timmisaqtu-qaq-taq-pu-q // tattiwa //
plane-exist-hab-indic-3sg here
V C

“Almost every day there are planes from Denmark here.” (Text n°45-46)

In a transitive construction, as already discussed above, a definite object expression will often receive topical status. However, although the western airport has been mentioned previously in the text and could thus already be considered as suitable topical material, the first mention of this airport occurred several clauses earlier. Moreover the speaker has since spoken of another small regional airport in the east of the country. It is therefore necessary for the speaker to reactivate this particular referent as a contrastive topic. The initial positioning of deictic element *taanna* and the unusual leftward positioning of the object before the subject allows her to explicitly draw the listener’s attention to the western airport again.

4.2 Post-positioning

4.2.1 Focalization: VO/iO and VS orderings

All the other word order variations noted, however, involve some form of post-positioning: either of the object or of the indirect complement or subject of the predicate in the case of the intransitive clause. In the majority of these cases this rightward positioning of an overt lexical argument indicates an explicit focal reading:

14. *tasiita-p iqqa-a-ni // ittuqaqpín-ni mikiniq-ni //*
Tasiilaq’-s near-3sg-loc village-inst.pl small-inst.pl
C X

angi-niqsa-a-wu-q kuumiit //
be big-more-be-indic-3sg Kuumiit

“In the area surrounding Tasiilaq, the most important of the small villages IS KUUMIIT.” (Text n°15)

In (14) the positioning of the nominal subject after the predicate group (with an intransitive verb) enables the emphasis to be placed squarely upon the displaced element as the focus of new information (in much the same way as a cleft construction in English). In the previous text the speaker has evoked the case of numerous small villages in the vicinity (including *Kuumiit*) where due to the lack of secondary schools children are obliged to leave home and attend school in *Tasiilaq*. She now chooses to focus specifically on the case of the largest of these small towns, *Kuumiit*, which is signaled out as being especially ‘newsworthy’. The change in constituent ordering allows the desired pragmatic interpretation.

An example involving the postposing of a focal object is the following:

15. *aamma* *mamaat-kaayu-u-pa-qput*
 and find good-intensive-be-indic-1pl.3sg
 V
 Topic

kataatti-it-tu-ta // *mattak* //
 Greenlanders-be.pl-cont-1pl whale skin
 DV O
 Comment

“and what we find really good, we Greenlanders, is whale skin.” (Text n°80)

In this example, the dependent verb group and the object are explicitly signaled as being particular newsworthy in relation to the information conveyed by the topical predicate. The speaker has just been discussing some of the local delicacies. Whale skin has not previously been mentioned and its position in clause final position,

many.pl	Tasiilaq-towards	move-many-part.3pl
S	X	V
Topic		Comment

↘

<i>ingattami</i>	<i>inuusuttut</i>	//
<u>particularly</u>	<u>young.pl</u>	
S		
Anti-topic		

“Many have moved towards Tasiilaq, particularly young people.”
(Text n°28)

The speaker has previously been describing the economic decline of a number of small villages. The post-positioned lexical group in (17) provides extra information concerning the identity of the already introduced subject, *amiqtaniit*. The topic referent is thus already salient and the postposed unaccented lexical expression, pronounced with a descending intonation, provides clarification as to the identity of the topic. The speaker presumably considers the previously established topic expression insufficiently clear. The pause (//) and non-descending intonation curve on the verbal group (→) act as an implicit request to put the topical prepositional information on hold until the anti-topic is uttered (Lambrecht 1994).

8. Conclusions

The detailed analysis of a contextualized oral narrative has enabled us to pinpoint several crucial factors related to the complex interaction of word order and pragmatics. The existence of a basic expected constituent ordering in Tunumiisut appears clearly established, with a first type of pragmatic flexibility afforded by the choice between the intransitive and transitive construction.

The potential flexibility commonly attributed to constituent ordering in Inuit is, however, exploited with moderation. When different word ordering patterns occur, such patterns are far from arbitrary and are used, on the contrary, to signal other particular

pragmatic arrangements. The post-positioning of either subject or object noun groups to the predicate is often used as a means of focalization, indicating the newsworthy status of the postposed constituent(s). On the contrary, when a postponed NP has an anti-topic status, prosodic factors help to signal the desired interpretation.

These tentative findings need, however, to be confronted with a most extensive range of data, comprising various types of modern day Tunumiisut speech. It would also be interesting to compare the relative stability of Tunumiisut word ordering patterns with those of other languages within the Inuit continuum.

Abbreviations

anaph	anaphoric
C	circumstantial elements (framework of the clause)
const	constative
cont	contemporative
coref	co-referential
DV	dependent verb
hab	habitual
iO	marked patient of the intransitive construction
inchoat	inchoative
indic	indicative
inst	instrumental
loc	locative
ncoref	non co-referential
O	unmarked patient of the transitive construction
part	participial
pl	plural
prox	proximate
result	resultative
S	agent of a transitive or intransitive construction
sg	singular
.	amalgamation
V	verb
X	oblique case complement in a clause relationship to the predicate

References

- Allen, Shanley and Heike Schröder. 2003. "Preferred Argument Structure in Early Inuktitut Spontaneous Speech Data" in J. W. Du Bois, L. Kumpf and W. Ashby (eds). *Preferred Argument Structure: Grammar as architecture for function*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Arnold, Jennifer E.; Thomas Wasow; Anthony Losongco and Ryan Ginstrom. 2000. "Heaviness vs Newness: the effects of structural complexity and discourse status on constituent ordering". *Language* 76.1: 28-55.
- Berge, Anna. 1997. Topic and Discourse, Structure in West Greenlandic, Agreement Construction. Unpublished PhD dissertation. Berkeley: University of California.
- Bok-Bennema, Reineke. 1991. Case and Agreement in Inuit. Berlin. New York: Studies in Generative Grammar, Foris Publication.
- Carter-Thomas, Shirley. 2000. La cohérence textuelle – pour une nouvelle pédagogie de l'écrit. Paris: L'Harmattan, coll. Langue et parole.
- Du Bois, John W. 1987. "The Discourse Basis of Ergativity". *Language* 63: 805-55.
- Fortescue, Michael. 1991, "Switch reference anomalies and 'topic' in West Greenlandic: A case of pragmatics over syntax" in J. Verschueren (ed.). *Levels of Linguistic Adaptation*. Amsterdam, Johns Benjamins.
- 1993. "Eskimo Word Order Variation and its Contact-induced Perturbation". *Journal of Linguistics* 29, 2: 267-289.
- Grove, Arnaq. 2000. Nedskrivning af nyere grønlandsk mundtlig fortælletradition. (A transcription of recent West Greenlandic literature and ways of recounting folk tales). Unpublished PhD dissertation. University of Copenhagen.
- Gundel, Jeanette; Nancy Hedberg and Ron Zacharski. 1997. Topic-Comment Structure, Syntactic Structure and Prosodic Tune. Workshop on Prosody and Grammar in Interaction. Helsinki.
- Hagège, Claude. 2002. "Sous les ailes de Greenberg et au-delà. Pour un élargissement des perspectives de la typologie linguistique". *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris* XCVII, 1: 5-35.

- Lambrecht, Knud. 1994. *Information Structure and Sentence Form. Topic, Focus and the Mental Representations of Discourse Referents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Studies in Linguistics.
- Lowe, Ronald. 1991. Les trois dialectes inuit de l'Arctique canadien de l'Ouest, analyse descriptive et étude comparative. Québec: Groupe d'Etudes Inuit et circumpolaires, Université Laval.
- Mahieu, Marc-Antoine, In press. "Argument Functions and Syntactic Change in Inuktitut" in *Crisis and Stability*. Paris: Peeters.
- Mahieu, Marc-Antoine et Nicole Tersis. 2005. "L'ergativité dans le domaine inuit" in F. Queixalos (ed). Actes du colloque PICS Ergativité du CNRS. Paris.
- Mithun, Marianne. 1992. "Is Basic Word Order Universal?" in D. Payne (ed). *Pragmatics of word order flexibility*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Mithun, Marianne and Wallace Chafe. 1999. "What are S, A and O?". *Studies in Language* 23.3: 569-596.
- Nowak, Elke. 2000. "Ergativité et transitivité en inuktitut, Arctique oriental canadien" in N. Tersis et M. Therrien (eds). *Les langues eskaléoutes, Sibérie, Alaska, Canada, Groenland*. Paris: CNRS Editions.
- Tersis, Nicole and Shirley Carter-Thomas. 2005. "Integrating Syntax and Pragmatics. Word-order and Transitivity Variations in Tunumiisut" *International Journal of American Linguistics* 7, 4: 473-500.
- Woodbury, Anthony C. 1977. "Greenlandic Eskimo, Ergativity and Relational Grammar" in P. Cole and J. Sadock (eds) *Syntax and Semantics* 8: Grammatical Relations. New-York: Academic Press.

