Phonological evidence for the syntax of preverbal and postverbal subjects in Huave

According to Stairs & Stairs (1981), the basic word order of Huave (an isolate of Southern Oaxaca) is SVO, but VS and VOS are also widely attested. Furthermore, in the San Mateo variety of Huave, preverbal subjects are distinguished from postverbal subjects by at least two phonological criteria:

(i) An H-tone can spread rightward from a verb to a postverbal subject, but can never spread rightward from a preverbal subject to a verb.

(ii) An epenthetic /a/ vowel can be inserted between a verb and a postverbal subject, but not between a preverbal subject and a verb.

1) a. SV: H tone on subject does not spread rightward; no epenthetic /a/
   (xíke) (taxejpíís)
   1SG 1SG.PST.bathe
   ‘I bathed.’

   b. VS: H tone on verb spreads rightward; epenthetic /a/ inserted
   (taxejpíís á xíke)
   1SG.PST.bathe 1SG
   ‘I bathed.’

   It has been independently suggested (Aissen 1992; Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 2001, etc.) that in other languages that allow both SV and VS orders, preverbal subjects occupy a higher position in the syntax than postverbal subjects. Pak (2008) adopts this basic proposal for Huave, arguing that the domain for H-spread is a spelled-out complement of C (i.e. a TP) and that preverbal subjects in Huave are in Spec,CP while postverbal subjects are in Spec,TP. (VOS order is then derived by fronting and adjunction of the predicate to TP.) As predicted by Pak’s analysis, H can spread rightward across multiple words in the same TP (see also Noyer 1991, Pike & Warkentin 1961):

   2) (taxomás nóts kóchíl sálín)
   1SG.PST.find one knife Salina.Cruz
   ‘I found a knife in Salina Cruz.’

   In this paper I focus on the second phonological phenomenon noted above – /a/ epenthesis – and argue that despite initial appearances, epenthetic /a/ can be analyzed as the product of a phonological rule that applies within the same domain as H-spread: a spelled-out TP.

   According to Stairs & Stairs (1981: 3,310), a is the apocopated form of the definite article aaga (‘the’), and in many contexts this analysis seems to be correct; both instances of a in (3) could be replaced by aaga with no apparent change in meaning or grammaticality.

   3) sapiíng xowîy lajneaj a cielo, aw a poj
   1SG.think very beautiful sky say turtle
   ‘I think the sky is very beautiful,” says the turtle.’

   However, I report several findings from a corpus study of Huave narratives showing that not all instances of a are apocopated aaga. First, a, unlike aaga, can precede a pronoun (1b). Second, when vowel-harmony causes /a/ to be raised, it is perceivable co-occurring with aaga (4). Third, unlike aaga, a shows a striking tendency to precede postverbal subjects (Table 1).

   4) taxééb é áágá náxey
   PST.bathe DEF man
   ‘The man bathed.’
Table 1. Distribution of a and aaga in the Cuentos huaves II-III

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Distribution of a</th>
<th>Distribution of aaga</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Postverbal subject</td>
<td>159 (52%)</td>
<td>27 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preverbal subject</td>
<td>16 (5%)</td>
<td>37 (34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postverbal object</td>
<td>72 (24%)</td>
<td>24 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other contexts</td>
<td>58 (19%)</td>
<td>20 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>306 (100%)</td>
<td>108 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To explain these results, I propose that in addition to the apocopated form of aaga, Huave has a homophonous version of a that is the result of a syntax-sensitive phonological rule of epenthesis. This epenthesis rule applies within the same domain as H-spread, thus accounting for the fact that both rules are blocked between preverbal subjects and verbs (1).

Unlike H-spread, however, /a/ epenthesis does not apply throughout a TP; i.e., it is not freely inserted between every pair of words in a sentence like (2). In fact, unambiguous /a/ epenthesis is never observed between a verb and a direct object, but only between the final word of a VP and a following word outside the VP, as in (1b), (3)-(4) and (5).

5) ngo naráng nájíít á xíke
   NEG SUB.do work 1SG
   ‘I don’t do work.’

Apparently, /a/ epenthesis has two structural constraints: in addition to being bounded by the same TP domain as H-spread, epenthesis only applies between two words Y and Z if Y belongs to a phrasal constituent that does not include Z (i.e., Y } XP Z ). This kind of ‘juncture rule,’ while cross-linguistically somewhat uncommon (Scalise et al. 2009:77), is not unprecedented: Tallerman (2006) advances a very similar proposal for Welsh consonant mutation, which applies between but not within XPs:

6) prynodd [y ddynes] feic (< beic)
   bought the woman bicycle
   ‘The woman bought a bicycle.’

This analysis of Huave a allows us to maintain the idea that preverbal subjects are in a structurally higher position than postverbal subjects, as has been argued for other languages with similar word-order variations. The two phonological rules presented here, which appear very different at first sight, are argued to be ultimately delimited by the same structural domain – a convergence with interesting implications for theories of the syntax-phonology interface.

Corpus texts:

Cuentos huaves II. 2006. 2a edición. Instituto Lingüístico de Verano, A.C. Electronic version.
Cuentos huaves III. 2006. 2a edición. Instituto Lingüístico de Verano, A.C. Electronic version.