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Ambipositions: A symptom of disharmony? An investigation of ambipositions and disharmony in Western Uralic languages

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1 Introduction

This paper seeks to elucidate the relation between ambipositions and disharmony, and investigate whether the presence of a substantial number of ambipositions implies that the language system is disharmonic overall. We start with a general discussion of disharmony, before moving on to discussing ambipositions. Thereafter, we will take a closer look at Finnish, Estonian and North Sami, which all contain an unusually high number of ambipositions.

2 Disharmony

The notion of *harmony* relates to word order, specifically the ordering of heads and dependents (Biberauer & Sheehan 2013:7). Different structures can be called harmonic if the order of head and dependent is constant across them (Biberauer & Sheehan 2013:6).

Although languages display a tendency for harmony, it is common for them to include some disharmonic structures. The study of harmony has sought to explain not only why harmonic structures are preferred, but also why disharmonic structures occur in spite of this preference. Language change is often taken to be the cause of disharmony. This is because the order of head and dependent might change earlier in some structures than others when a language is undergoing a gradual word order shift (Croft 2002:240). The fact that harmonic systems change, indicates that there must be other factors which are given more weight than harmony. One such consideration might be to adapt to the surrounding language environment in a language contact situation.

I will only look at the surface patterning of head and dependent in this paper. Even if one thinks that the order is different underlyingly, word order variation at the surface level still reflects an underlying difference, such as a difference in what type of movement is allowed or required (Biberauer & Sheehan 2013:22). I therefore believe that a better understanding of the surface patterning of disharmony can lead us one step closer to understanding the phenomenon as a whole.

Finnish, Estonian and North Sami present a good opportunity for investigating whether a link between disharmony at different levels exists. In these languages,

there is considerable disharmony even for individual lexical items within the adpositional phrase, and I aim to uncover whether there is *noteworthy* disharmony also between different kinds of phrases. However, one might ask what constitutes noteworthy disharmony, when some disharmony is indeed the norm. Cross-linguistically, the order within the adpositional phrase often patterns with that of certain other head-dependent pairs, such as verb-object, noun-genitive and auxiliary-verb (Dryer 1992:108). I will therefore deem the disharmony noteworthy if no dominant ordering can be found across these pairs.

3 Ambipositions

When looking at disharmony within the adpositional phrase, I am particularly concerned with *ambipositions*, by which I mean an adposition which can alternately occur before or after its complement (Libert 2006:1). Such disharmony at the lexical level might be seen to constitute the most extreme level of disharmony.

Even though the position of an ambiposition is not constant, it is often restricted by the context, as many ambipositions convey different meanings depending on their position. The position can also affect its behaviour in other ways, such as determining which case it assigns (Libert 2006:1). Ambipositions are thought to arise in the period of transition when the position of heads in a language changes (Libert 2006:83–84).

Though ambipositions are not uncommon cross-linguistically, they normally constitute a very restricted group (Janda, Antonsen & Baal 2014:91; Libert 2006:1,3). In cases where only a few lexical items display this patterning, they might be written off as idiosyncrasies. It is much rarer that a language contains such a high proportion of ambipositions that they constitute an integral part of its word order system. The status of many of the potential ambipositions in the world's languages is also disputed, as they might be reanalysed as members of other syntactic categories such as nouns and adverbs. This can make it hard to find out whether a language has a high proportion of ambipositions, a difficulty which is compounded by the fact that they are rarely mentioned in the literature (Libert 2006:1–3). However, there are some well-known examples of languages which contain a substantial number of ambipositions, such as the Western Uralic languages Finnish, Estonian and North Sami. More than 10% of the adpositions in these languages are ambipositions (Abondolo 1998b:3; Janda et al. 2014:91). We will therefore take a closer look at these three languages, and see if their unusually high degree of ambipositionality is matched by an equally high degree of disharmony. We will consider the behaviour of their ambipositions, before turning to their general word order tendencies.

4 Ambipositions in Finnish

Finnish is predominantly postpositional, but there is considerable disharmony within the adpositional phrase. The language contains 68 adpositions, of which 76.5% are postpositions, 10.3% are prepositions, and 13.2% are ambipositions (Antonsen, Janda & Baal 2012:10; Janda et al. 2014:91). It has been suggested that Finnish has so many

ambipositions because some of its adpositions stem from adverbs, which might have retained their free word order even as adpositions (Grünthal 2003:46–47; Libert 2006:84).

The position of Finnish ambipositions is partly determined by semantics. Some semantic factors only influence the positioning of individual lexical items, but there are also some overarching tendencies. One such tendency is that ambipositions are normally used prepositionally in expressions of time, and postpositionally in expressions of space (Huumo 2013:320). The same is apparently the case in Estonian (Janda et al. 2014:92).

In the examples below, this pattern is exemplified by the Finnish ambiposition *läpi* 'through'. It occurs after its complement in the spatial expression in (1), but before its complement in the temporal expression in (2). The opposite order would be allowed in the phrases below, but it is much more marked.

(1) *Metsä-n* *läpi*
forest-GEN through
'Through a/the forest'

(2) *Läpi* *talve-n*
through winter-GEN
'Throughout winter' (based on Huumo 2013:320)

The ambipositions mainly display the same case-marking behaviour as other adpositions in the language. In Finnish, prepositions normally assign the partitive case and postpositions the genitive case (Karlsson 2008:221—222). This is demonstrated in (3) and (4) below.

(3) *Ilman* *sateenvarjo-a*
without umbrella-PART
'Without an umbrella' (based on Vainikka 1993:143)

(4) *Talo-n* *takana*
house-GEN behind
'Behind the house' (based on Vainikka 1993:136)

Most ambipositions follow this pattern, as shown by the ambiposition *keskellä* 'in the middle of' below. In its prepositional usage in (5), its complement is marked with the partitive case. The complement of the postpositional variant in (6), on the other hand, is in the genitive.

(5) *Keskellä* *lattia-a*
in.the.middle.of floor-PART
'In the middle of the floor'

(6) *Lattia-n* *keskellä*
floor-GEN in.the.middle.of
'in the middle of the floor'
(Abondolo 1998a:163, as cited in Libert 2006:62–63)

However, there are exceptions to this rule, as demonstrated in (1) and (2), where *läpi* 'through' assigned the genitive regardless of its position (Libert 2006:62—65).

5 Ambipositions in Estonian

Estonian has 183 adpositions in total, and their distribution is fairly similar to that of Finnish, with 73.8% postpositions, 15.8% prepositions and 10.4% ambipositions (Antonsen et al. 2012:10; Janda et al. 2014:91).

Estonian prepositions show the same preference for assigning partitive as their Finnish counterparts, and the postpositions likewise tend to assign genitive. The majority of ambipositions conform to this pattern, though some always assign the same case regardless of position (Grünthal 2003:68,83–84). The examples in (7) and (8) show that the ambiposition *alla* 'under' assigns partitive as a preposition and genitive as a postposition.

(7) *Alla* *vet*
under-LOC water.PART
'In the middle of the floor'

(8) *Vee* *alla*
water.GEN under.LOC
'Under the water' (Abondolo 1998b:23, as cited in Libert 2006:61)

It therefore seems that the overall adpositional system and the behaviour of the ambipositions are virtually the same in Finnish and Estonian.

6 Ambipositions in North Sami

Postpositions are as dominant in North Sami as in the two other languages, and constitute 75.0% of the language's 128 adpositions. However, ambipositions form a much larger group in North Sami than in Finnish and Estonian, as 21.9% of the adpositions are ambipositional. On the other hand, a marginal 3.1% of the adpositions are prepositions (Antonsen et al. 2012:10; Janda et al. 2014:91–92).

It has been proposed that the unusually strong presence of ambipositions in North Sami is due to its close contact with prepositional Norwegian and Swedish, as well as the predominantly postpositional Finnish (Janda et al. 2014:91). However, it is unclear why a larger group of prepositions has not developed. Even so, the proposal that ambipositionality in North Sami is connected to language contact might have some merit. Janda et al. (2014:95) show that there are notable regional differences in the use of ambipositions, according to whether there is closer contact with Swedish and Norwegian on one hand, or with Finnish on the other hand. In

areas where there is an equal amount of contact, the postpositional variants of the ambipositions are more frequent than the prepositional variants. This indicates that there is an inherent tendency in North Sami to favour head-finality in the ambipositional phrase, as is the tendency for adpositional phrases overall. However, language contact affects this tendency. In areas where there is close contact with Finnish, the preference for the postpositional variants of ambipositions is much stronger. When there is closer contact with Norwegian and Swedish, on the other hand, there is a slight preference for the prepositional variant. It is thus clear that the inherent preference for head-finality in North Sami is reinforced in contact with typologically similar languages, whereas it might be changed in contact with head-initial languages.

The case-marking behaviour of adpositions is more straightforward in North Sami than in Finnish and Estonian. Prepositions, postpositions and ambipositions all take complements in the genitive (Janda et al. 2014:92). The case-marking behaviour of ambipositions is demonstrated in (9) and (10).

(9) *Rastá joga*
across river.GEN
'Across the river'

(10) *Joga rastá*
river.GEN across
'Across the river' (Janda et al. 2014:93)

The behaviour of North Sami ambipositions with regard to positionally determined meaning differences seems less clear-cut, however. Janda et al. (2014) investigate the correlation between meaning differences and position for four frequently used ambipositions. Although they conclude that the positioning of the ambipositions in question depends on the semantic context, exactly how the semantics influences the positioning varies from ambiposition to ambiposition. For instance, the ambiposition *miehtá* ('over') is mainly postpositional in temporal expressions. This is contrary to the behaviour displayed by the ambiposition *čađa* ('through'), which is normally prepositional in similar contexts (Janda et al. 2014:100–101). The preferred usage of these ambipositions in temporal expressions is demonstrated in (11) and (12).

(11) *Dálvvi miehtá*
winter.GEN over
'Through the winter' (based on Janda et al. 2014:96)

(12) *Čađa áiggi*
through time.GEN
'Through time' (based on Janda et al. 2014:97)

It is of course a possibility that more consistent trends might emerge if a larger sample of ambipositions was investigated. However, I will tentatively conclude that

the positional meaning differences of ambipositions seem more idiosyncratic in North Sami than in the other two languages.

7 Word order

It is now time to see whether the lexical disharmony represented by ambipositions translates into cross-categorial disharmony in the languages. As earlier mentioned, I will compare the order of adposition and complement with that of verb and object, auxiliary and verb, and noun and genitive. We have already seen that although there is considerable disharmony across adpositional phrases, the languages favour postpositions, meaning that the adpositional phrase is predominantly head-final.

In all the languages, the same tendency for head-finality is observed in noun-genitive constructions, as the noun follows the genitive (Dryer 1998:287,289). The opposite order is disallowed in Finnish[1] and Estonian (Verschik 2011:83). It is unclear whether this is the case for North Sami as well, but as its overall word order tendencies seem very similar to those of Finnish and Estonian, we might expect it to pattern with them in this respect too. It thus seems as though the ordering of noun and genitive mirrors the dominant ordering seen in the adpositional domain. However, it seems to allow for less optionality. The head-final noun-genitive construction in Estonian is illustrated in example (13) below.

(13) *Pae* *gümnaasium*
Pae.GEN gymnasium
'Gymnasium of Pae' (Verschik 2011:84)

When it comes to the order of the major clause constituents of verb and object, on the other hand, the three languages tend to be head-initial with SVO being the dominant order (Ehala 2006:50; Holmberg 2000:123; Vilkuna 1998:178). All the languages also show a preference for head-initiality in that the auxiliary usually precedes the verb (Ehala 2006:50—51; Karttunen 1986:48; Kemi 2007:25). However, the languages allow the opposite ordering in certain contexts, and differ slightly in the particulars of this.

In Finnish, the unmarked word order in a declarative clause is SVO, but SOV order is sometimes allowed, for instance when focusing a constituent other than the object (Holmberg 2000:123–124). Example (14) shows that only SVO order is possible in a basic declarative sentence, whereas (15) shows that the SOV order which was disallowed in (14) is grammatical in a focus construction.

(14) a. *Jussi* *kirjoitti* *romaanin.*
Jussi wrote (a) novel
'Jussi wrote a novel.'

b. * *Jussi* *romaanin* *kirjoitti.*
Jussi novel wrote
'*Jussi wrote a novel.' (based on Holmberg 2000:124)

[1] Thanks to Anna Hollingsworth for her native speaker judgement.

(15) *JUSSI romaanin kirjoitti.*
Jussi novel wrote
'It was Jussi who wrote a novel.' (Holmberg 2000:125)

Even though the auxiliary tends to precede the verb in Finnish, it is not uncommon for the opposite order to occur (Holmberg 2000:124; Karttunen 1986:48). However, there is a restriction on word order when the clause contains both auxiliary, verb and object: the verb phrase cannot be head-initial when the inflection phrase is head-final (Holmberg 2000:124). This is in accordance with the Final-over-Final constraint, which states that a head initial phrase cannot be dominated by a head-final one (Biberauer & Sheehan 2013:39).

SVO is taken to be the basic word order of Estonian as well, as it is the one which occurs most frequently. However, it is also common for the object to precede the verb, even in subordinate clauses (Ehala 2006:49—50). Example (16) illustrates the dominant VO order in Estonian, whereas (17) is an example of a subordinate clause which has OV as its neutral word order.

(16) *Mart leidis noa.*
Mart.NOM found knife.GEN
'Mart found a knife.' (based on Ehala 2006:53)

(17) *[Otsus täna suppi süü-a] teh-ti üksmeelselt.*
decision.NOM today soup.PART eat-INF made-IMPERS unanimously
'The decision to eat soup today was made unanimously.' (Ehala 2006:60)

The word order is once again affected by the introduction of an auxiliary. The auxiliary normally precedes the verb, with the object intervening between the two. This means that the auxiliary-verb pair is head-initial, whereas the object-verb pair is head-final (Ehala 2006:50—51). This does of course not violate the Final-over-Final Constraint, but it is nonetheless striking that such a disharmonic word order is not only permitted, but is indeed the norm. Sentence (18a) below displays this curious AUX-O-V order, whereas (18b) shows that the opposite ordering of object and verb does not seem to be acceptable.

(18) a. *Lapse-d on täna suppi söönud.*
child-PL have today soup.PART eaten
'The children have eaten soup today.'

b. ??? *Lapse-d on söönud suppi täna.*
child-PL have eaten soup.PART today
'The children have eaten soup today.' (based on Ehala 2006:61)

Like Finnish and Estonian, there is also a certain optionality in the word order of North Sami, though the limits to the variation are unclear. SVO is also the unmarked word order for North Sami, but as for Finnish and Estonian, the object sometimes precedes the verb (Vilkuna 1998:178). Vilkuna (1998:178) claims that OV order is restricted to certain contexts, such as focus constructions. However, as she says the

same about Finnish and Estonian, it is hard to know exactly how the optionality in North Sami compares to the optionality found in these languages. As is the case in Finnish and Estonian, auxiliaries in North Sami normally precede the verb (Kemi 2007:25). It is unclear whether other orders are also permitted. Sentence (19) demonstrates the basic SVO order of North Sami.

(19) *Elle* *loga-i* *reivve.*
Elle.NOM read-PAST.3SG letter.ACC
'Elle read a/the letter.' (Julien 2013:24)

In the literature, there are fewer mentions of optionality for North Sami than for Finnish and Estonian, which might of course indicate that less optionality exists. However, it might simply be due to the fact that North Sami has not been the object of as much linguistic study as the other two languages. Research into optionality in North Sami word order is thus needed. As it is the language with the most ambipositions of the three, it would be surprising if it indeed displays the most limited variation for other categories.

8 A system to the disharmony?

As we have seen, there is a split in the word order of all three languages, as the verb-object pair and the auxiliary-verb pair tend to be head-initial, whereas the adposition-complement and noun-genitive pairs are predominantly head-final. There also seems to be a fair amount of optionality in the order within these phrases. These language systems thus seem to be characterised by pervasive disharmony. However, there seems to be a system to the disharmony. Verb-object and auxiliary-verb belong to the clausal domain, whereas noun-genitive and adposition-complement are taken to belong to the nominal domain. It therefore seems as though the clausal domain favours head-initiality in these three languages, whereas the nominal domain has a preference for head-finality. This might lead us to hypothesise that if a language seems to be very disharmonic, this is only because we have not found the level at which it is harmonic yet.

We have seen that adpositions in the languages form a particularly disharmonic category. Adpositional phrases are normally assumed to belong to the nominal domain, but they often have a close relationship to the verb as well. This might lead them to take on certain characteristics of the clausal domain, which makes it seem natural that this category should display both patterns.

The general optionality and the strong presence of ambipositions might therefore be attributed to the fact that there are two domain-level harmonic systems. It seems plausible that it is the competition between the systems of the two domains which gives rise to ambipositions in these languages. The present study thus supports the hypothesis that there is a link between disharmony on different levels in the language, in that a split in the patterning for a lexical item implies that there is a split between the domains in the language. Larger and more typologically diverse studies are needed to confirm whether a high number of ambipositions only occur

in languages with similar word order splits. Such studies are sorely needed as the typological similarities of the three languages investigated prevent us from drawing strong conclusions.

The tables below clearly show the similarities in word order and in the behaviour of ambipositions across the three languages.

Domain	Head-complement pairs	Finnish	Estonian	North Sami
Clausal	Dominant order of verb-object	Head-initial	Head-initial	Head-initial
	Opposite order allowed	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Dominant order of auxiliary-verb	Head-initial	Head-initial	Head-initial
	Opposite order allowed	Yes	Yes	?
Nominal	Dominant order of noun-genitive	Head-final	Head-final	Head-final
	Opposite order allowed	No	No	?
	Dominant order of adposition-noun	Head-final	Head-final	Head-final
	Opposite order allowed	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 1 The order of head-complement pairs in the languages.

Behaviour	Finnish	Estonian	North Sami
Main case assigned by prepositional variant	Partitive	Partitive	Genitive
Main case assigned by postpositional variant	Genitive	Genitive	Genitive
Mainly follow same case-assignment rules as other adpositions	Yes	Yes	Yes
Semantic factors can determine position	Yes	Yes	Yes
The semantic factors affecting position are consistent across ambipositions	Yes	Yes	No

Table 2 The behaviour of the ambipositions.

9 Conclusion

We have thus seen that Finnish, Estonian and North Sami are characterised by a split in word order between different domains, as well as by considerable optionality. This

mixed pattern might be the result of language change driven by language contact. Even though further research is needed, it is striking that some of the few languages we know to have a sizeable group of ambipositions display such a word order split. Thus, it might seem as though the presence of a high number of ambipositions may be a symptom of overall disharmony. However, this overall disharmony might be caused by different domains having their own harmonic systems.

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