

**Information structure as a hindrance to contact-induced word order change:  
the case of Surgut Khanty**

**Aims.** One crucial factor that has the potential to influence word order is language contact: it is well-documented that sustained interaction with another language, especially if the contact language is sociolinguistically dominant, can lead to syntactic restructuring over time (e.g. Johanson 2002, Heine and Kuteva 2005). Several cases of an OV-to-VO shift (e.g., in Balto-Finnic, Hungarian, Yiddish, Romani, Quechua, Nahuatl) have been analysed as induced by contact with VO languages. Yet, it seems clear that in a great many cases even prolonged contact did not give rise to a shift to VO (Kiparsky 2003), even in the absence of attitudinal barriers (Thomason 2001). The exact linguistic mechanisms that may favour or disfavour the transmission of word order properties are still poorly understood. We present novel data from a verb-final/OV language, Surgut Khanty (SKh), that points to the role of Information Structure (IS) related language-internal factors in SKh’s sustained “resistance” of to a potential shift from OV to VO (or to mixed OV/VO) engendered by contact with VO Russian.

**Background.** Surgut Khanty has been typically described as rigidly verb-final/OV (Honti 1984, Csepregi 1998, Nikolaeva 1999). From a sociolinguistic perspective, the cultural pressure of Russian on SKh increased dramatically during the 20th century. While at the beginning of the century, Russian influence was not pervasive (Csepregi 2024: 28), by now SKh has been in intense contact with Russian for many decades. Currently, most native speakers are bilingual, with Russian as sociolinguistically dominant (Schön 2017). One may expect this persistent contact to have affected the word order properties of SKh, leading to less rigid verb-finality and an increase in the appearance of post-verbal constituents (PVCs), especially, post-verbal objects, given the VO character of Russian. However, according to existing work, since the earliest (19th c.) descriptions, the frequency of PVCs in SKh has stayed low and stable (found in cca. 7-9% of clauses, Asztalos, Gugán & Mus 2017).

**Methods.** To probe this apparent stability, we analyzed two datasets comparatively. The first one is based on the earliest available SKh texts (four tales collected by H. Paasonen in 1901), while the second one is a dedicated new database of 265 clauses containing PVCs, sourced from a range of spoken tales and dialogues (Schön 2024). The second database consists of transcribed utterances accompanied by surrounding context, as well as corresponding audio files. In both datasets we tagged PVCs for information status (in terms of Prince 1981) and syntactic features. Only declarative clauses were considered; we excluded imperatives (n=3) and questions (n=26), as well as clauses with afterthoughts (defined as prosodically separate and having a preverbal correlate; n=32) and discourse particles (n=70). This yielded 67 and 118 relevant examples, respectively.

**Quantitative analysis.** The distribution of PVCs is shown in (1); ‘Misc. adjuncts’ include locative and temporal adjuncts; ‘Targets’ include purpose infinitives, goals of motion, and detachable directional preverbs (see Haig et al. 2024 for the category).

(1)	Subjects, active clauses	Subjects, passive clauses	by-phrases, passive clauses	Direct objects, active clauses	Targets	Misc. adjuncts
<b>1901</b>	13	3	3	3	25	20
<b>2010–2016</b>	14	10	7	1	26	60

Intriguingly, very few postverbal objects occur in both sources. Regarding information status, the postverbal core arguments are almost exclusively Discourse- and Hearer-Old in the old texts (2a). The newer texts exhibit only a slight shift, with Discourse- and Hearer New PVCs still appearing as a minority pattern (2b).

(2a)	DN	DO
HN	2	0
HO	0	21

(2b)	DN	DO
HN	6	0
HO	0	26

**Proposal.** Based on the distribution of information structural statuses in (2a,b) (also backed by our impression that PVCs are typically less prosodically prominent than preverbal material), we suggest that the postverbal domain in SKh is, by default, associated with discourse-‘nonprominence’ and favours constituents that are given and backgrounded (like in Turkish, Göksel 2013, Öztürk 2013). We propose that ultimately this is the reason for the strikingly low number of objects as PVCs in (1), taking into account the fusion between the core grammatical roles and information structural (IS) statuses in the language described by Nikolaeva (1999, 2001; see also Dalrymple & Nikolaeva 2011).

Specifically, in SKh an object of a verb showing no object agreement acts as (part of) the focus, representing new information. When the verb displays agreement with it, the object acts as a secondary aboutness topic. As opposed to objects, subjects cannot be focal/new but must be given, acting as primary aboutness topics by default. We assume that subjects receive their aboutness topic interpretation in the vP-external canonical subject position (akin to Rizzi’s 2006 SubjP), and, following É. Kiss (2019), objects receive their aboutness topic interpretation in the vP-external object position, which is where they also trigger object agreement. Importantly, the role of agreement differs for subjects and objects. Agreement with the subject is obligatory and we assume it does not by itself implicate the subject’s aboutness topic status; it is the canonical subject position that does. Agreement with the object, on the other hand, is tied to the object’s aboutness topic role: both are tied to the vP-external object position.

It follows from this that objects cannot be placed postverbally. The object role is bundled with focal status in the absence of agreement and with aboutness topic status in the presence of agreement. Both of these are discourse-prominent statuses, hence incompatible with the nonprominence of pure givenness backgrounding associated with the post-verbal field. Subjects, by contrast, can occur post-verbally. Their aboutness topic status is bundled with the canonical vP-external subject position. When placed postverbally, they are merely given and backgrounded. The prediction made by our approach is that if a theme argument surfaces as a subject instead of an object, it can be given-backgrounded and placed post-verbally. This prediction is borne out and explains the frequency of passivisation for the sake of post-verbal theme-backgrounding in SKh (3); see (1). When the theme becomes a subject, the backgrounded *by*-phrase can surface as a PVC (4).

- (3) (You will see a cup with blood in the drawer.) (4) (What happened to your eye?)  
*Mɛ:nə noq ji:nʷəyʲti βərət. Tu:tən i:tə paβləmi nɨŋnə.*  
 1SG.LOC up drink.PST.PASS.3SG blood.3SG then outpoke.PST.PASS.3SG 2SG.LOC  
 ‘I have drunk her blood.’ ‘You poked [it] out then.’

Adjuncts, which do not have an inherent IS-specification to begin with, are free to be purely given-backgrounded if warranted by context, and to become PVCs as such. From the present perspective, the post-verbal occurrences of Targets, which are typically not given, likely require an independent explanation (for a cognitive-functional account, see Haig 2022).

**Conclusion.** Our proposal explains the high frequency of active and passive subject PVCs, the availability of *by*-phrase PVCs, and the scarcity of object PVCs. If it is on the right track, it may provide an account for the lack of any sign of an OV-to-VO shift in Surgut Khanty, despite long-standing intensive contact with VO Russian.

**Selected references:** Asztalos, E., K. Gugán & N. Mus. 2017. Uráli VX szórend: nyenyec, hanti és udmurt mondatszerkezeti változatok. *Nyelvelmélet és diakrónia* 3. É. Kiss, K. 2019. Fused grammatical and discourse functions in Ob-Ugric. In: *Proceedings of the Workshop Clause Typing and the Syntax-to-Discourse Relation in Head-final Languages*. University of Konstanz. Haig, G. et al. (eds.). 2024. *Post-predicate elements in the Western Asian Transition Zone: A corpus-based approach to areal typology*. Berlin: LangSci Press. Nikolaeva, I. 2001. Secondary topic as a relation in information structure. *Linguistics* 39. Rizzi, L. 2006. On the form of chains. In *On Wh-movement*. MIT Press. Schön, Zs. 2024. A database of postverbal constituents in Surgut Khanty. LMU München.