

Licensing SOV in Estonian: A naturalness rating study

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This study explores the syntax and information structure (IS) of Estonian declarative matrix clauses with multiple preverbal elements. While Estonian exhibits verb-second (V2) properties (Ehala, 2006), corpus research on spoken Estonian indicates that multiple elements may precede the verb if the immediately preverbal position is occupied by a prototypically topical expression, such as a pronominal subject (Lindström, 2005). This has been taken as evidence for a left-peripheral Topic (Top) position in Estonian, which may be preceded by a contrastive element such as Contrastive Topic (CT), yielding verb-third (V3) order when both CT and Top positions are filled. Researchers have previously argued that a constraint for agents to occur in Top allows the V2 constraint to be violated (Tael, 1988; Henk, 2009). Their hypothesis predicts OSV word order when an object constituent acts as a CT but cannot account for corpus-attested examples of non-V2 order with clause-initial subjects (1). I test my claim that V3 is licensed under conditions broader than agentivity or topicality in a naturalness rating experiment using contrastive ellipsis as a diagnostic for IS.

- (1) *Mõni uus nüanss ehk asja juures on,*
 some.NOM new.NOM nuance.NOM perhaps thing.GEN at is
aga midagi põhjanevat küll mitte
 but something.PART fundamental.PART indeed NEG
 “There may be some new nuances about this thing, but definitely nothing
 fundamental” [Postimees, 2000]

Specifically, I propose that multiple preverbal elements are licensed when the following two conditions are met:

- i. The initial constituent is a CT (i.e. it has a discourse-salient focus alternative, but does not function as the primary Focus of the clause)
- ii. Any elements intervening between the CT and the verb must be discourse-given (but not necessarily Topics)

A naturalness rating experiment (N=29) was conducted using CT-remnant (2a) and CF-remnant (2b) gapping ellipsis (Repp, 2010) to disambiguate matrix clause IS.

- (2) a. *Andres_{CT} kardab_F koeri, Lilli_{CT} mitte_F*
 Andres.NOM fears dogs.PART Lilli.NOM NEG
 “Andres IS scared of dogs, Lilli ISN'T.”
- b. *Andres_{CF} kardab koeri, mitte Lilli_{CF}*
 Andres.NOM fears dogs.PART NEG Lilli.NOM
 “ANDRES is scared of dogs, not LILLI.”

In closely related Finnish, a generic Contrast position has been argued to precede Top (Vallduvi & Vilku, 1998). In Estonian, Contrastive Focus (CF) subjects are also permitted clause-initially, allowing us to test whether violation of V2 order is sensitive to the focus structure of the clause in addition to contrast. The experiment crossed matrix clause word order (SOV/SVO/OVS) with ellipsis type (CT/CF-remnant). Figure 1 shows that while SOV order is dispreferred compared to V2 orders, the naturalness of SOV is significantly improved with a CT subject compared to a CF subject. An additional manipulation of the relative contextual salience of the matrix and remnant subject showed that SOV order structurally constrains the comprehenders' interpretation of the IS of the subject, so that context has little effect, compared to canonical SVO clauses.

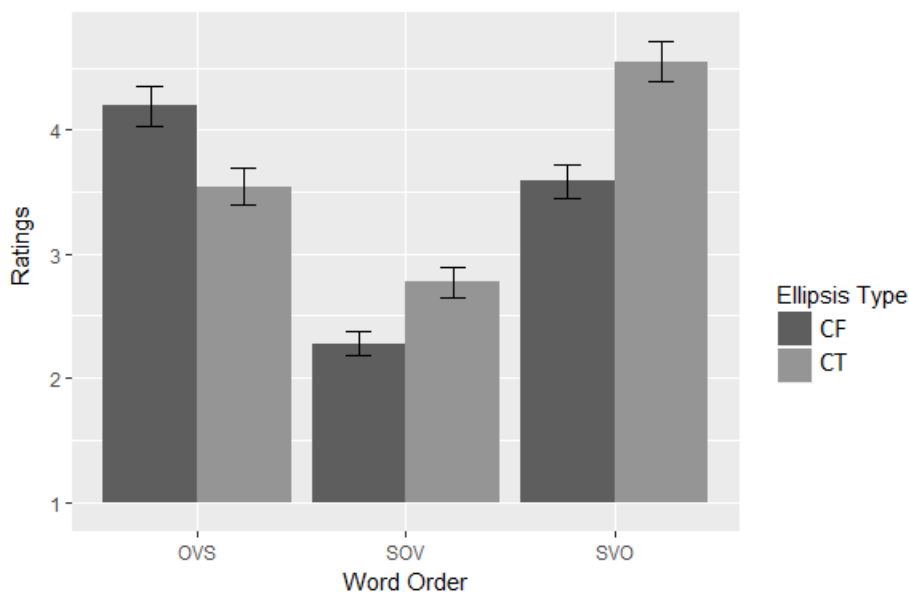


Figure 1. Means and standard errors of naturalness ratings to OVS, SOV and SVO matrix clauses followed by ellipsis with CT and CF subject remnants.

Additional native speaker judgements (3) indicate that multiple discourse-given constituents may intervene between a CT and the verb, while being unable to precede the verb in absence of contrast due to V2. This further speaks against the simple CT-Top analysis.

- (3) **(Koolis_{CT}) ma tast ei mõelnud*
 school.INE 1S 3S.ELA NEG think.PTC
 “(At school) I didn’t think about him/her”

The distinction between left-peripheral CFs and CTs, as observed in the naturalness rating experiment, contributes novel understanding of the left periphery in this understudied discourse-configurational language. Non-V2 CT clauses cannot simply be derived from Topic-initial V2 clauses by raising a focus-marked constituent to the CT position, nor is there evidence for CTs being extra-clausal in Estonian.

To conclude, evidence from a naturalness ratings study supports the analysis of CT licensing in Estonian in which discourse-given material may be raised to a preverbal position through phrasal movement. This may serve to avoid placing phonologically deaccented material after the narrow Focus of the clause, as well as to maintain syntactic parallelism with CT-remnant ellipsis.

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