Analyzing head-initiality, head-finality and mixed headedness: domains, language types, and patterns of change

Andrew Simpson
University of Southern California

Original generative views of head-initial vs. head-final languages were that (a) such languages are/should be mirror image versions of each other in their head-complement patterns, and (b) head-initiality/-finality should regulate all head-complement orderings in a language in a uniform way. However, many languages seem to show contrasting headedness in different domains – for example, in clausal vs. nominal domains. This raises the question of what it means to classify a language as being 'head initial' or 'head-final'. Additionally, within a single domain, there may also be patterns of mixed headedness. Some of these patterns appear to be genuine cases of mixed headedness, and perhaps signs of an ongoing change in headedness, while other patterns may be surface illusions, created by movement from underlying uniform structures. This talk approaches various issues raised by the appearance of mixed headedness and identifies a range of asymmetries linked to head-finality/head-initiality, including: (a) how non-harmonic patterns may be analyzed differently in head-final and head-initial languages, and (b) how head-final and head initial languages may be constrained to initiate and spread change from one directionality of selection to another in different ways – bottom-up or top-down. In approaching these issues, the talk will present and analyze three particular case studies which highlight important aspects of the relation of head-initiality to head-finality: (i) exceptional modal structures in Chinese and Southeast Asian languages, (ii) the syntax of 'head-final' sentence-final particles in head-initial languages such as Chinese, with a focus on Hokkien, and (iii) language change resulting in head finality in certain dialects of Chinese.