

Lena Borise LingedIn Talk

November 4, 2016

12:00 – 1:00 pm

Word order and prosody: What can we learn from Georgian focus? (joint work with Maria Polinsky)

The main goal of this talk is to argue that focus can be read off minimal syntactic structure and does not require a special projection in syntax. We illustrate this point using data from Georgian, one of the languages noted for its dedicated focus position in front of the verb but also known for its extremely flexible word order. Using a number of diagnostics, we demonstrate that Georgian is underlyingly an SOV language. Unlike Hungarian, another language noted for its preverbal focus position, Georgian verbs do not undergo syntactic raising. In addition to SOV, Georgian also allows word orders where various constituents follow the verb.

Using a series of syntactic diagnostics, we show that Georgian SVO is structurally ambiguous. First, it can correspond to the structure where the object constituent is base-generated in the right periphery of the clause (right-periphery SVO). This type of structure is associated with a particular prosodic contour. Second, SVO can represent the structure where the object constituent is in focus, thus constituting a mirror image of the SOV with focused object (object-focus SVO). We show that this structure is derived by remnant VP-movement. The prosodic structure of such clauses is markedly different from the prosodic structure of clauses with right-periphery SVO.

The results bring us closer to understanding the reported interchangeability of Georgian SOV and SVO, and preverbal and postverbal focus placement in the language. They also show that Georgian doesn't have a syntactic projection dedicated to housing focus.