

Constraining VP-fronting: The role of prosodic factors in Imere

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This talk focuses on an overgeneration problem in the literature on word order variation. It has been argued for a variety of languages that basic word order involves an operation of VP-fronting, particularly for OVS and VOS systems (e.g. Pensalfini 1995; Massam 2001; Rackowski and Travis 2000; Kalin 2014). However, many of these analyses run into what I refer to as the "evacuation problem", the observation that some dependents of the verb can never appear in the fronting VP and so must be stipulated to always move out (see Chung 2005 and Massam 2010 for discussion). I examine this issue using new data from the Polynesian outlier Imere (Vanuatu). I show that, although Imere is an SVO language, facts from right-attaching adverbial particles motivate a fronted VP constituent in clause-medial position. As in other VP-fronting analyses, we run into the evacuation problem: adverbial particles must remain in the fronted VP, but postverbal arguments and other VP-internal modifiers must all be stranded. I show that, in Imere, this difference correlates with a difference with prosodic status: adverbial particles differ from other VP-internal material in not being associated with a prosodic phrase. On this basis, I suggest that VP-fronting is influenced by prosodic factors, particularly the constraint StrongStart (Selkirk 2011; Elfner 2012), which requires the verb to be prosodically prominent in the VP. I propose that StrongStart may influence the outcome of copy deletion (cf. Nunes 2004; Landau 2006), giving rise to scattered deletion. This proposal does not run into the evacuation problem, and straightforwardly explains the fact that patterns of object and modifier placement after the Imere verb look just like in familiar SVO languages. Finally, this model derives two key observations about VP-fronting: (i) the evacuation problem only arises in head-initial languages, and (ii) what fronts with the VP in languages with the evacuation problem is always a minimal element (this is true in Niuean, Hawaiian, Samoan, Fijian (Oceanic), Ch'ol (Mayan), Tenetehára (Tupí-Guaraní), and Santiago Laxopa Zapotec (Zapotec)).