

Greenberg's Universal 25 and its exception

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When we talk about language universals, we need to consider how to deal with the (seeming) counterexamples. In this paper, we would like to discuss Greenberg's (1963) Universal 25 and its alleged exception. Greenberg's (1963) Universal 25 states that if the pronominal object follows the verb, so does the nominal object. Although this statement holds almost universally, Næss (2010) reports that Āiwoo (Austronesian, Oceanic) has this order: nominal objects precede the verb as in (1a) while pronominal objects are postverbal as in (1b).

- (1) *John i-togulo-mu*
John pfv-hit-2min.a (pfv=perfective, min=minimal number, a=augmented)
'You hit John.'
- (2) *i-togulo-mu iu*
pfv-hit-2min.a 1min
'You hit me.'

John precedes the verb in (1) while *iu* follows the verb in (2), which is an exception to Universal 25.

However, we should note that Āiwoo has two types of verbs: A-verbs (e.g. *togo* 'hit') and O-verbs (e.g. *togulo* 'hit' in (1) and (2)). According to Næss (2017), A-verbs appear in SVO order while O-verbs appear in OVS order. Importantly, focus is on the action in clauses with A-verb while focus is on object in clauses with O-verb. Then, we can argue that in (2) the object pronoun *iu*, which does not have much information, is dislocated from the preverbal (clause-initial) position, which is the focus position in sentences with O-verb. Then, we can attribute this counterexample to the marked information structure of sentences with O-verbs in Āiwoo. It is often the case that focus changes the basic word order of a language. Thus, we can still keep Universal 25 as a true universal of languages.

This study shows that it is important to reexamine the alleged counterexamples to a universal by careful investigation of the whole system of language(s). It also shows the importance of reconsidering the nature of the proposed universals.

References: Næss, Å. (2010). A counterexample to the universal number 502 in the Universals Archive, ed by F.Plank, T. Mayer, T. Mayorava & E. Filimonova. <https://typo.uni-konstanz.de/archive/intro/index.php>. Næss, Å. (2017). A short dictionary of Āiwoo. Asia-Pacific Linguistics College of Asia and the Pacific. The Australian National University, Canberra.