

Neutral versus Non-Neutral Word Orders in Inuktitut

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1 Introduction

In all Inuit varieties, word order is generally assumed to be free (e.g. Fortescue 1984, Dorais 2010).¹ However, there seems to be a strong consensus that the most neutral order is SOXV, where X refers to any oblique arguments (e.g. Fortescue 1993, Tersis and Carter-Thomas 2005).² More precisely, this order is claimed to surface in neutral contexts, and any deviation from this is triggered by discursive or stylistic factors. For instance, consider examples in (1) from Kalaallisut.

- (1) a. piniartu-p puisi pisar-aa SOV
 b. puisi piniartu-p pisar-aa OSV
 c. puisi pisar-aa piniartu-p OVS
 d. piniartu-p pisar-aa puisi SVO
 hunter-ERG catch-IND.3SG>3SG seal-ABS
 ‘The hunter caught the seal’
 (Fortescue 1984: 181)

Fortescue (1984) argues that the SOV order in (1a) is the most neutral one. On the other hand, the OSV order in (1b) signals that the object is “thematized” (i.e., corresponds to what the sentence is about) and represents a given topic. As for the SVO and OVS orders in (1c-d), placing the object or the subject after the verb emphasizes the argument and indicates that it refers to new information. Another factor is “heaviness”, as heavy arguments tend to appear post-verbally.

Moreover, by comparing texts collected at different time periods from Inuit and Yupik varieties, Fortescue (1993) shows that the overall frequency of non-neutral orderings has increased over time in the more recent texts across all varieties, as shown in Table 1 for Inuktitut.

Inuktitut texts	(S)(O)V	(S)VO	(O)VS	OSV	VX	Non-neutral (%)
Tulugaq nerlermik (Rasmussen 1921)	56	2	0	0	1	5.1%
Inuppalu inuillu (Nungak and Arima 1958)	75	8	5	0	1	15.7%
Le renard rouge (Ivarluk 1958)	44	2	6	2	0	18.5%
Christmas in Labrador (Metcalf 1978)	58	12	1	0	16	34.1%

Table 1: Neutral and non-neutral orderings across Inuktitut texts.
(Fortescue 1993:293)

Fortescue (1993) also notes that the increase is more acute in more westerly varieties like Central Alaskan Yupik and North Alaskan Iñupiaq, where the influence of English, a SVO language, has been greater than for other varieties. Fortescue (1993:285) proposes that “[t]he effect of English in these areas has thus been to loosen up the word order, obscuring the pragmatic factors that originally determined the relative positioning of clausal constituents when ‘neutral’ conditions did not apply, but without directly imposing its own rigid ordering patterns on the receiving language”. In other words, he argues that the increase of non-neutral orderings is a contact-induced change causing the loss of “the standard narrative norms” (1993:288).

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¹ While all possible orders are grammatical, the degree of acceptability may differ when a sentence contains wh-words or indefinite arguments (see Sherkina-Lieber 2004, Turenne 2020).

² In Inuit, obliques refer to any argument case-marked overtly with which the verb does not agree.

Yet, the previous studies on word order in the Inuit language have some shortcomings. First, the statistical significance of the proposed factors, such as newness and heaviness, has never been evaluated in any variety. There is also little detail given on what makes any argument heavy. And as for the possible contact-induced change on word order, Fortescue (1993) acknowledges that the small size of his corpus and the varying characteristics of the texts may have skewed the results. This paper presents a study on word order in North Baffin Inuktitut based on a large corpus and using variationist sociolinguistic methods (see Labov 1972, Tagliamonte 2012). The objectives of the research are twofold: 1) determining if non-neutral orderings have been increasing and 2) testing the effects of newness and heaviness on the pre- and post-verbal position of arguments. The results show that the proportion of non-neutral orderings have in fact not increased over time, contrary to Fortescue's prediction, suggesting that the rise of Inuktitut-English bilingualism has not affected word-order patterns in this variety. Also, while heavier arguments (based on the number of syllables) tend to be placed after the verb, newly-introduced ones are surprisingly favored pre-verbally.

The paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, details about the corpus and the methodology used in this research are explained. In Section 3, the statistical analysis on the variation between neutral and non-neutral orderings and between pre- and post-verbal placement is presented. Finally, in Section 4, the results of the statistical analysis are discussed.

2 Corpus and Methodology

In Section 2.1, I describe the community where the data were collected. In Section 2.2, I then explain the characteristics of the speakers and the recordings. Finally, in Section 2.3, I describe all variables that will be considered in the statistical analysis.

2.1 Community

All the data analyzed in this study were collected in the Inuit community of Mittimatalik, located on Baffin Island in Canada, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: The location of Mittimatalik.

Based on the 2021 Canadian census, Mittimatalik has 1,555 residents and about 93% of them self-identify as Inuit. The vast majority of the Inuit living in Mittimatalik also report Inuktitut as their mother tongue and the main dialect is North Baffin Inuktitut (Dorais 2010). However, 90% of all residents report having a good knowledge of English. The most important sociolinguistic change in

this community occurred in 1961, when the Canadian federal government built the first school. All Inuit children were then required to attend school and English was the sole language of education until the mid-1970s. Consequently, Inuktitut-English bilingualism quickly rose during that period (cf. Qikiqtani Inuit Association 2014). Given this timing, if the rise of Inuktitut-English bilingualism has had any impact on word-order patterns, we should expect speakers born after the 1950s to have first been affected by this sociolinguistic change.

2.2 Speakers and Recordings

In total, the speech of 40 North Baffin Inuktitut speakers was analyzed in this study. They were born between 1902 and 1998 and all grew up in Mittimatalik or in the surrounding areas, as some families kept a semi-nomadic lifestyle until the 1970s (cf. Qikiqtani Inuit Association 2014). Of them, 21 are male and 19 are female. Table 2 shows their distribution by year of birth and gender.

Speaker	Year of birth	Gender	Speaker	Year of birth	Gender
<u>1</u>	<u>1902</u>	F	21	1957	F
<u>2</u>	<u>1905</u>	M	22	1957	M
<u>3</u>	<u>1907</u>	F	23	1962	F
<u>4</u>	<u>1915</u>	M	24	1964	M
<u>5</u>	<u>1918</u>	M	25	1966	F
<u>6</u>	<u>1921</u>	M	26	1967	F
<u>7</u>	<u>1924</u>	M	27	1972	F
<u>8</u>	<u>1924</u>	M	28	1980	F
<u>9</u>	<u>1927</u>	F	29	1981	F
<u>10</u>	<u>1929</u>	M	30	1982	M
<u>11</u>	<u>1930</u>	M	31	1983	M
<u>12</u>	<u>1931</u>	F	32	1984	F
<u>13</u>	<u>1936</u>	F	33	1990	F
14	1936	M	34	1990	M
<u>15</u>	<u>1938</u>	M	35	1991	F
<u>16</u>	<u>1940</u>	F	36	1991	F
17	1947	F	37	1992	M
18	1948	M	38	1993	M
19	1951	F	39	1996	M
20	1955	M	40	1998	M

Table 2: The speakers.

The 15 speakers underlined in Table 2 were recorded in the 1970s or the 1990s. The recordings were conducted by members of the community and consist of personal stories. This set of recordings was provided for use in my research by the Pond Inlet Library and Archives Society. I recorded the remaining 25 speakers (not underlined) during my fieldwork in the community. These recordings consist of three types of narratives, namely personal stories, narrations of the wordless storybook *Frog, where are you?* (Mayer 1969) and narrations of the short movie *Pear story* (Chafe 1980). Furthermore, I asked these speakers about their language choices between Inuktitut and English in different relationships and activities. The results are presented in Table 3 on the next page.

The self-reported language choices in Table 3 show interesting patterns. Almost all speakers born before the 1980s report using only Inuktitut with their parents and siblings, while those born afterwards say that they also use English. On the other hand, the majority of the speakers report using both Inuktitut and English with their friends and partner. Moreover, Inuktitut seems to be preferred during outdoor activities (such as hunting and fishing), while both Inuktitut and English are frequently employed at work and English is the only language used by many speakers in activities requiring a computer, like chatting online or writing emails. In general, we observe a slow but steady increase in the use of English across younger speakers, as will be more clearly confirmed in the statistical analysis presented in Section 3.1. Note also that similar results on language choices are reported by Patrick (2003) for Inuit living in another community in Nunavik.

Speaker	Parents	Siblings	Friends /partner	Children	At home	At work	Outdoor activities	On the phone	Chatting online	Writing emails
14	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	-
17	I	I	I	I/E	I/E	I	I	I	I	I
18	I	I	I	I	I	I/E	I	I/E	I/E	I/E
19	I	I	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I	I/E	I/E	I/E
20	I	I	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I	I/E	I/E	E
21	I	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	-	-
22	I	I	I/E	I	I	I/E	I	I/E	I/E	I/E
23	I	I	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I	I	I/E	E
24	I	I	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E
25	I	I	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E
26	I	I	I/E	I/E	I/E	E	I	I	E	E
27	I	I	I	I	I	E	I	I	I/E	E
28	I/E	I/E	I/E	E	I/E	I/E	I	E	E	E
29	I/E	I/E	I/E	-	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E
30	I/E	I/E	I/E	-	I/E	I/E	I	I/E	E	E
31	I/E	I/E	I/E	I	I/E	E	I	E	E	E
32	I	I	I/E	I	I	I/E	I	I/E	I/E	E
33	I	I/E	I/E	I	I/E	I/E	I	I/E	I	E
34	I	I	I	-	I	I	I	I/E	E	E
35	I/E	I	I/E	I	I	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	E
36	I	I	I/E	I	I	I	I	I	I/E	-
37	I/E	I/E	I/E	-	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	E	E
38	I	I	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I	I/E	E	E
39	I	I	I/E	-	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	E
40	I	I/E	I/E	-	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E	I/E

Table 3: Self-reported language choices between I(nuktitut) and/or E(nglish).

2.3 Variables

In the statistical analysis presented in the next section, two independent variables are investigated. The first one is the variation between neutral and non-neutral orderings. As discussed in Section 1, the neutral ordering is standardly assumed to be SOXV, as in the example in (2) from Kalaallit.

- (2) ilinniartitsisu-p Aggu kana-ni taku-aa
 teacher-ERG Aggu.ABS down.there-LOC see-IND.3SG>3SG
 ‘The teacher saw Aggu down there’
 (Fortescue 1984: 95)

Crucially, note that the subject and the object are both encoded in the verbal inflection and that either can be dropped in the right discourse context. Thus, the neutral ordering may correspond to examples in which the subject or the object is dropped or no oblique argument is present, as long as the order of overt arguments matches the SOXV pattern. As for non-neutral orderings, they refer to any other pattern, such as SXVO, OSV or VS. Accordingly, each sentence has been coded as having a neutral or non-neutral pattern. In total, 1878 sentences (with at least one overt argument) were extracted from the recordings. Of them, 1200 have a neutral ordering and 678 a non-neutral one.

The second independent variable considered in this study is the variation between pre-verbal and post-verbal arguments. In total, 2249 arguments referring to a subject, an object or an oblique were extracted from the recordings. Of them, 1634 are pre-verbal and 615 are post-verbal. Note that discontinuous arguments (with one element not adjacent to the others) were disregarded.

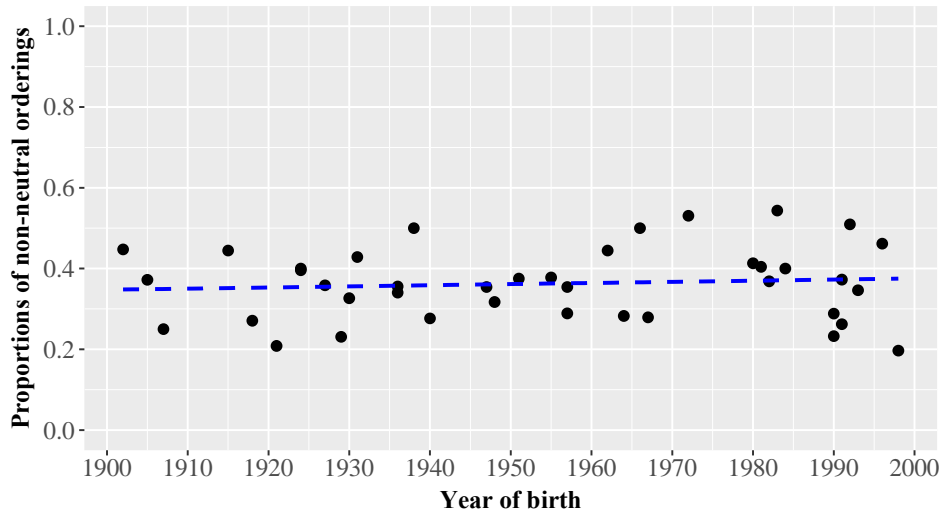
As for the dependant variables, the speakers’ birth years were considered for both independent variables to determine whether word-order patterning has changed over time. The self-reported language choices, as shown in Table 3, and the numbers of English words in the recordings, as will be discussed in the next section, were also considered to establish whether the rise of bilingualism in Mittimatalik caused an increase in non-neutral patterning. Finally, three linguistic factors were tested for the variation between pre- and post-verbal arguments: 1) Grammatical function (subject, object or oblique); 2) Newness (new or given); and 3) Heaviness (based on the number of syllables).

3 Statistical Analysis

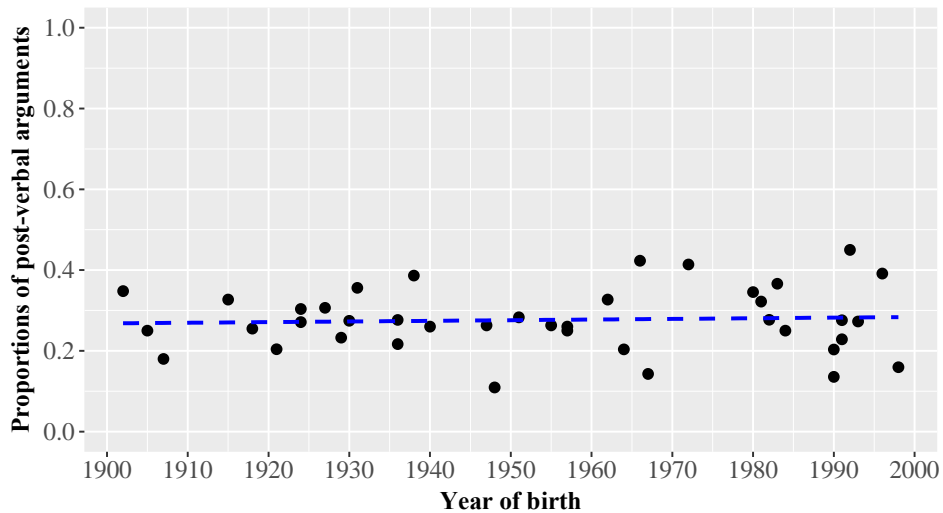
Section 3 presents the statistical analysis on the variation between neutral and non-neutral orderings and between pre- and post-verbal arguments. Section 3.1 tests the statistical correlations between these two variables and the speakers' birth years, their language choices and the average numbers of English words used in their speech to determine whether the rise of Inuktitut-English bilingualism has had any influence on word order. Then, Section 3.2 shows the results of a multivariate analysis looking at the factors conditioning pre- and post-verbal placement.

3.1 The Rise of Inuktitut-English Bilingualism and Word Order

First, consider the proportions of non-neutral orderings and post-verbal arguments for each speaker based on their year of birth (YOB), as shown in Graph 1 and Graph 2, respectively.



Graph 1: Proportions of non-neutral orderings by Speaker and YOB.



Graph 2: Proportions of post-verbal arguments by Speaker and YOB.

In both graphs, the average trendline remains stable over time, suggesting that the proportions of non-neutral orderings and of post-verbal arguments have not changed significantly and crucially

that the rise of Inuktitut-English bilingualism must not have affected word-order patterns, contrary to Fortescue (1993)'s prediction (see Section 1).

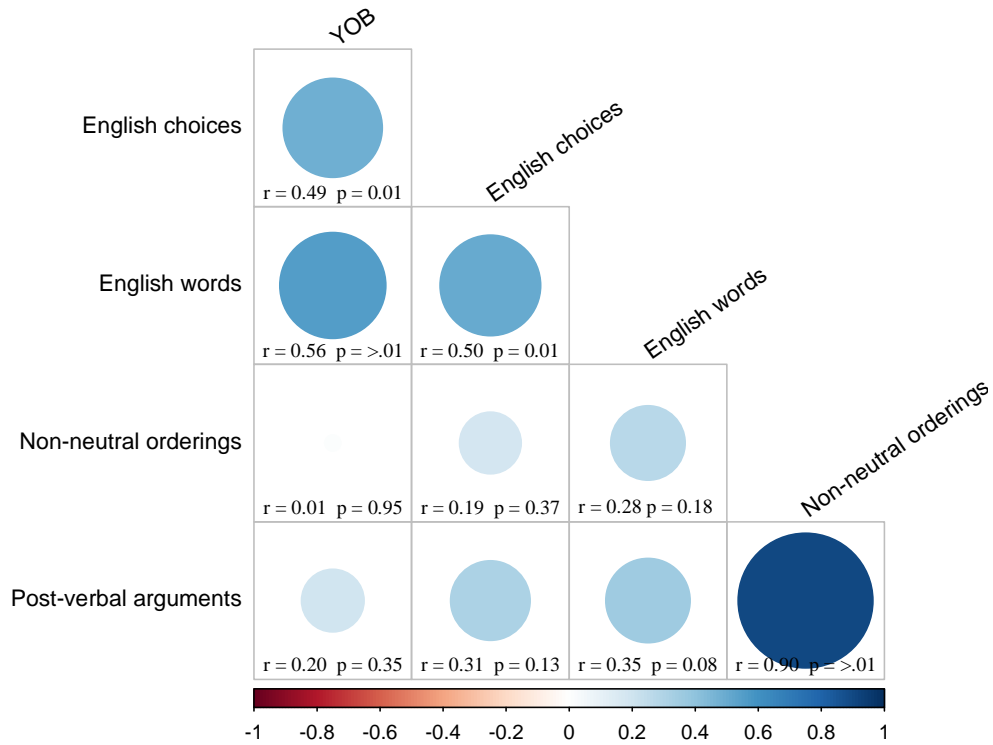
In order to provide even stronger evidence for this conclusion, Pearson correlation tests were also conducted between the proportions of non-neutral orderings and of post-verbal arguments from the 25 speakers recorded by me (see Section 2.2) and their birth years (see Table 2), their proportions of English choices (see Table 3) and the average numbers of English words in their speech. I consider only the speakers recorded by me as only they completed the language survey and provided narrations of the wordless storybook *Frog, where are you?* (Mayer 1969) and of the short movie *Pear story* (Chafe 1980). Using the same materials crucially allows me to make valid comparisons. Table 3 presents the average number of English words for each speaker based on the total of words. In general, younger speakers used more English words instead of less common words in Inuktitut, like *frog* instead of *naaraajik* or *scarf* instead of *qungasirmiutaq*,³ and also words that do not exist in the language, such as *pear* and *goat* instead of the more generic words *piruqtuviniq* 'fruit' and *siutirqutujuq* 'animal with big ears (like donkey, mule, etc.)', respectively.

Speaker	Total of English words	Total of all words	EWs/100 words
14	0	536	0.00
17	0	690	0.00
18	1	570	0.18
19	15	576	2.60
20	0	575	0.00
21	1	440	0.23
22	8	387	2.07
23	6	534	1.12
24	12	381	3.14
25	23	583	3.95
26	22	479	4.59
27	14	475	2.95
28	32	428	7.48
29	15	296	5.07
30	25	362	6.90
31	24	403	5.96
32	22	523	4.21
33	36	447	8.05
34	0	485	0.00
35	12	205	5.85
36	14	525	2.67
37	5	244	2.05
38	22	481	4.57
39	61	546	11.17
40	2	453	0.44

Table 3: English words (EWs) used in recordings by Speaker.

The Pearson correlation matrix in Graph 3 on the next page presents the results of all the tests. On one hand, the correlations between the speakers' birth years, their proportions of English choices and their averages on English words are all found significant (with p-values (p) under 0.05) and with a moderate degree of strength (with coefficient values (r) around 0.50). These results indicate that the rise of Inuktitut-English bilingualism has impacted the speakers' language choices and speech. On the other hand, all correlations between the speakers' proportions of non-neutral orderings or their proportions of post-verbal arguments with any previous variable are not statistically significant (with p-values above 0.05), which conversely suggests that the rise of Inuktitut-English bilingualism has not had any influence on word-order patterns. The correlation between the speakers' proportions of non-neutral orderings and their proportions of post-verbal arguments is naturally significant and strong, as the latter implies the former, but this result should be disregarded as it is irrelevant.

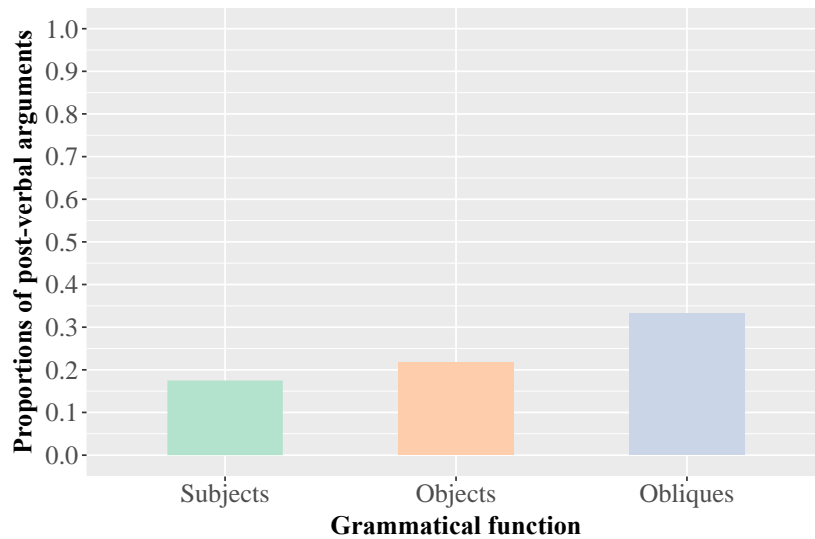
³ Less common words in Inuktitut also show great lexical variation. For instance, the English word *frog* may also be translated as *nirlinaujaq* or *pilliriaq*, and the English word *scarf* as *qungasiruaq* or *qungasiuti*.



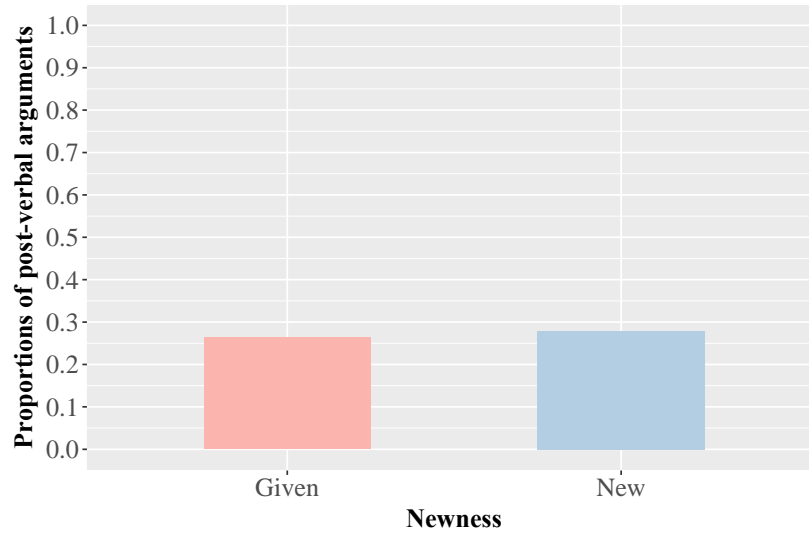
Graph 3: Pearson correlation matrix.

3.2 Factors conditioning Pre- and Post-Verbal Placement

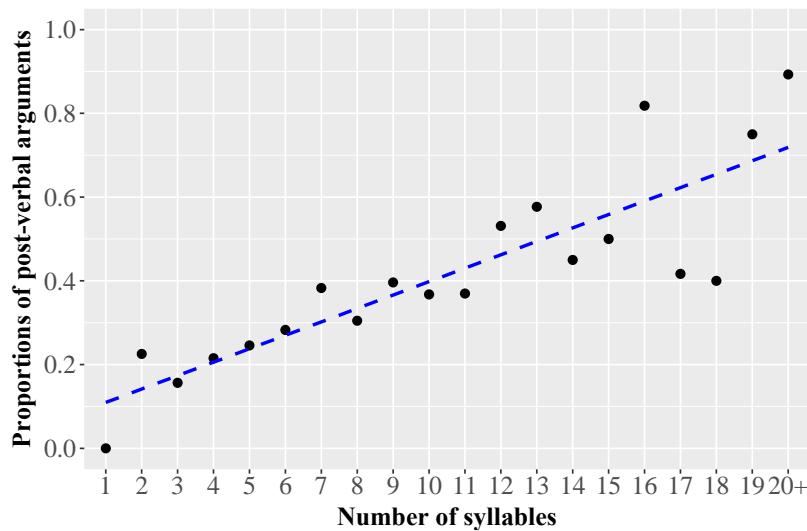
The previous section demonstrated that word-order patterns in North Baffin Inuktitut, as spoken in Mittimatalik, have not changed over time. This section now tests the effects of the factors proposed to condition pre- and post-verbal placement. First, consider the proportions of post-verbal arguments based on Grammatical function in Graph 4, Newness in Graph 5 and Heaviness (as calculated by the number of syllables) in Graph 6.



Graph 4: Proportions of post-verbal arguments by Grammatical function.



Graph 5: Proportions of post-verbal arguments by Newness.



Graph 6: Proportions of post-verbal arguments by Heaviness (number of syllables).

In Graph 4, we see that obliques appear after the verb more frequently than objects and subjects. Then, in Graph 5, we observe no important difference between given and new arguments, contrary to the predictions made in previous studies arguing that newly-introduced arguments tend to appear post-verbally (see Section 1). In accordance with previous claims, however, we see in Graph 6 that the heavier the arguments are the more often they are placed after the verb.

Table 4 below presents the results of a mixed effects logistic model measuring the probability of post-verbal placement. The coding scheme used for the categorical variables is treatment coding, and the chosen reference levels are “Subjects” for Grammatical function and “Given” for Newness. The speakers’ birth years and the numbers of syllables for Heaviness are entered as linear variables, and the speakers are entered as a random variable. In sum, the results corroborate the distribution of the data shown above with one exception. On one hand, oblique and heavy arguments appear after the verb significantly more frequently than other types of arguments and the speakers’ birth years do not have a statistically significant effect on the variation, as expected. On the other hand, though, newly-introduced arguments are in fact favored pre-verbally, contrary to what was predicted in previous studies and also to what Graph 5 seems to show.

	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p-value	
(Intercept)	-2.349	0.153	-15.335	<.001	*
Grammatical function = Objects	0.253	0.192	1.322	0.186	
Grammatical function = Obliques	0.930	0.129	7.185	<.001	*
Newness = New	-0.411	0.110	-3.727	<.001	*
Heaviness (syllables)	0.161	0.014	11.285	<.001	*
Speakers' birth years	-0.331	3.530	-0.094	0.925	
<i>Random effects</i>					
Speakers	Variance = 0.120, Std. dev. = 0.346, N = 40				

Table 4: Mixed effects logistic model on post-verbal placement.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

To sum up, the results of the statistical analysis show that while there is evidence suggesting that the rise of Inuktitut-English bilingualism in the Inuit community of Mittimatalik has an influence on speakers' language choices in relationships and activities and on the number of English words used in their speech, there is no indication that this sociolinguistic change has had any effect on word order, contrary to Fortescue's (1993) prediction. Furthermore, the variationist analysis on pre- and post-verbal placement has revealed that newly-introduced arguments have a higher probability to appear pre-verbally than given ones, in opposition to what had been hypothesized in other studies. Conversely, the results confirmed that heavy arguments tend to be placed after the verb. A difference was also observed between subjects/objects and obliques, whereby the latter appear after the verb more frequently than the former, which to my knowledge has never been reported before.

How can we explain the fact that the rise of Inuktitut-English bilingualism in the community has not affected word-order patterns while it has clearly impacted the speakers' language choices and the number of English words used in their speech? I believe that two factors should be taken into consideration. The first one is that Inuktitut is still the dominant language for most speakers even if the majority of them are also fully bilingual. In studies on contact-induced language changes, it is generally believed that any linguistic feature may be transferred from one language to another, although certain linguistic domains are more stable than others (e.g. Thomason and Kaufman 1988, Heine and Kuteva 2008). For instance, lexical borrowings are more frequent than syntactic transfers. Crucially, far reaching effects on morphosyntax, including word order, need a prolonged contact and for speakers to be no longer dominant in the replica language (see Winford 2005, Lucas 2015). As mentioned in Section 2.1, the vast majority of Mittimatalik Inuit residents still report Inuktitut as their mother tongue. The second factor is the communicative dimension that this syntactic transfer would have in Inuktitut. Matras (2009) hypothesizes that contact-induced changes are not random but driven by communicative purposes. Borrowings and transfers are brought by bilingual speakers who seek to exploit their full linguistic repertoire. In this case, using more non-neutral orderings "for no apparent reason" would in fact reduce the options in the speakers' linguistic repertoire as word-order flexibility in Inuktitut is standardly used for discursive considerations.

Moreover, the fact that newly-introduced arguments are favored pre-verbally goes against Fortescue (1993)'s assumption that given arguments should normally appear early in the sentence while new arguments later. However, note that the effect found between new and given arguments in the statistical analysis might have been skewed by the fact that some post-verbal given arguments may be afterthoughts and thus should be excluded. From a methodological perspective, the issue is to determine when particular post-verbal given arguments are afterthoughts in a systematic manner. I leave this issue for future work, but newly-introduced arguments are reported to surface early in the sentence in some languages (see Mithun 1992). Inuktitut could simply be one of them.

As for the post-verbal placement of heavy arguments, many studies on Heavy-NP shift claim that longer phrases are delayed during utterance planning as they are less-easily planned, although length is generally measured in number of words rather than syllables (see MacDonald et al. 1993). If the reason is psycholinguistic and derives from utterance planning, we would expect that it is not the length of an argument alone that should matter but the length of an argument relative to others,

as argued in Stalling and McDonald (2011). In any case, I again leave this additional question for future research. Finally, as for the distinction between subjects/objects and obliques, it is argued that subjects and objects in the Inuit language are in fact topicalized arguments whereas obliques are non-topicalized arguments (see Berge 2011, Carrier 2021). It is moreover commonly claimed that topicalized arguments in free word-order languages generally appear pre-verbally (cf. Givón 1988). Hence, this contrast likely stems from the distinctive discursive status of these arguments.

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