

Abstract of thesis entitled

**On the Word Order of  
Locative Prepositional Phrases in Cantonese:  
Processing, Iconicity and Grammar**

Submitted by

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This study investigates the factors governing the placement of prepositional phrases in Cantonese from three perspectives: processing, iconicity and grammar. Prepositional phrases with the locative preposition *hai2* allow both [PP V] and [V PP] orders, [PP V] being the dominant order indicating the location of action. The order [PP V] in Cantonese as a VO language is typologically rare, since VO languages strongly correlate with V-PP order (Dryer, 1992, 2003). Hawkins (1994) explains the rarity of the order [[P NP] V] as instantiated in Mandarin Chinese as the result of its relatively low processing efficiency.

The processing perspective aims to explain why [[P NP] V] order exists in Cantonese based on the principle of Early Immediate Constituents (EIC) (Hawkins, 1994). The relatively low processing efficiency of [[P NP] V] order is tolerated and eased due to the availability and high frequency of use of an alternative structure, the topic PP construction. By EIC (Hawkins, 1994), the topic PP construction is calculated to have a higher processing efficiency than the [[P NP] V] construction. According to the data from two Cantonese corpora, the frequency of occurrence of the topic PP construction occupies a relatively high percentage. The data also confirm that as the length of PP increases, the processing motivation to employ the topic PP construction increases.



The iconicity perspective focuses on the semantics of the two orders [PP V] and [V PP] which are argued to exhibit iconicity of temporal sequence. The [PP V] and [V PP] orders conform closely to Tai's (1975) semantic principle that the preverbal PP denotes the location of action, while the postverbal PP denotes the location of the participant after an action. The topic PP construction also shows iconic properties as setting a scope before an action is performed, and syntactically the topic PP is placed before the verb.

The grammatical perspective discusses the postverbal constraint, which in general states that only one constituent is allowed after the verb in Mandarin (Light, 1979, Huang S-F, 1984, Sybesma, 1999). The postverbal constraint does not work well in Cantonese because, in general, Cantonese allows more than one constituent after the verb. The postverbal constraint is seen as a tendency, which may be functional in nature, rather than an absolute constraint.

The topic PP construction is a solution for the two functional principles, EIC and iconicity to be compatible with each other. The availability and high frequency of use of the topic PP construction as an alternative structure relieve the relatively low processing efficiency of [[P NP] V]. The two functional principles, processing and iconicity are thus shown to have taken part in shaping grammatical structures.

