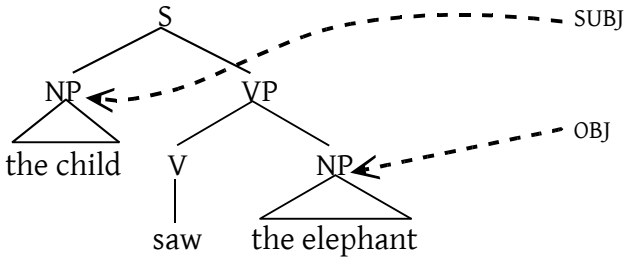
Configurationality, p. 1

Configurational language

= a language in which constituent structure reflects grammatical functions, with the subject under S and the object under VP.

Example: English
(the tree ignores X̄ details)

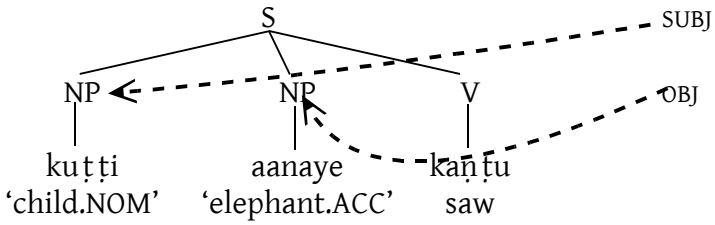


In a configurational language, there is a consistent relationship between constituent structure and grammatical functions

Non-configurational language

= a language in which constituent structure does not reflect grammatical functions. Subject and object are both directly under S, and thus cannot be distinguished by structural position. There is no VP constituent.

Example: Malayalam



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NOTE: Constituent order is free in the Malayalam S, so these can occur in any order. Free order and non-configurationality often go together, although many configurational languages also have free order. Free order in non-configurational languages is more striking because the flat structure makes the order appear to be much freer.

Configurationality, p. 2

Another example of non-configurationality:
Warlpiri (and some other Australian languages)

As long as the auxiliary (in **boldface**) is the second constituent, any reordering is grammatical. The sentences all mean 'The child sees me.' The pre-aux element is a focus or topic.

Kurdu- ngku **ka- ju** nya- nyi ngaju
child- ERG PRES- 1SG see- NPST I.ABS
Kurdu- ngku **ka- ju** ngaju nya- nyi.
child- ERG PRES- 1SG I.ABS see- NPST
Nya- nyi **ka- ju** kurdu- ngku ngaju
see- NPST PRES- 1SG child- ERG I.ABS
Nya- nyi **ka- ju** ngaju kurdu- ngku
see- NPST PRES- 1SG I.ABS child- ERG
Ngaju **ka- ju** kurdu- ngku nya- nyi.
I.ABS PRES- 1SG child- ERG see- NPST
Ngaju **ka- ju** nya- nyi kurdu- ngku.
I.ABS PRES- 1SG see- NPST child- ERG

But, based on the pre-aux test, the V+object does not form a constituent:
* Ngaju nya- nyi **ka- ju** kurdu- ngku.
I.ABS see- NPST PRES- 1SG child- ERG
* Nya- nyi ngaju **ka- ju** kurdu- ngku.
see- NPST I.ABS PRES- 1SG child- ERG

This is evidence that there is no VP constituent in Warlpiri.

Note that an embedded infinitive, which looks like V+object, can be in initial position:

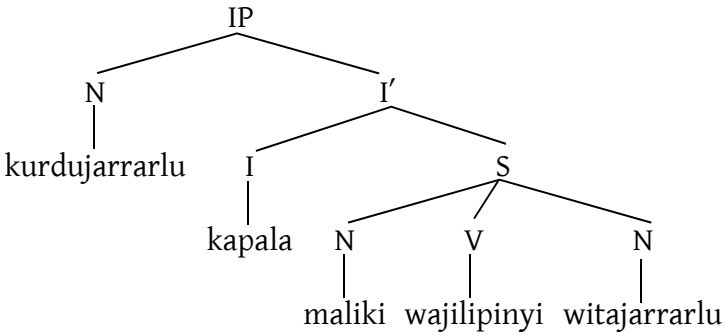
[Purlapa pi- nja- karra- rlu] **kala- lu** pirlirrpa yilya- ja.
corroboree.ABS dance- INF- COMP- ERG USIT- 3PL.SUBJ spirit.ABS send- PST
'By dancing a corroboree (a traditional ceremony), they would send away the spirit.'

Warlpiri and similar languages also allow "split NPs":

Kurdu- jarra- rlu **ka- pala** maliki wajilipi- nyi wita- jarra- rlu.
child- DUAL- ERG PRES- 3dualSUBJ dog chase- NPST small- DUAL- ERG
'Two small children are chasing a dog.'
(can also mean: 'Two children are chasing the dog and they are small.')

They also have extensive null anaphora.

Configurationality, p. 3

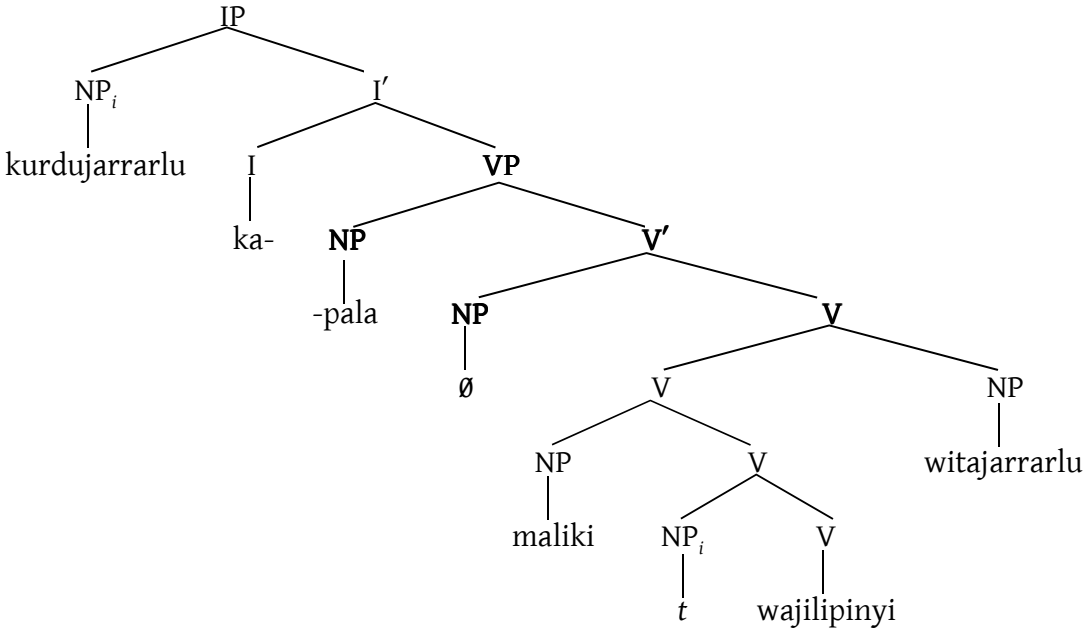


$$\begin{bmatrix} \text{SUBJ} & \begin{bmatrix} \text{PRED} & \text{‘child’} \\ \text{NUM} & \text{DUAL} \\ \text{ADJ} & [\text{“small”}] \end{bmatrix} \\ \text{PRED} & \text{‘chase } \langle (\uparrow \text{SUBJ})(\uparrow \text{OBJ}) \rangle \text{’} \\ \text{TENSE} & \text{PRES} \\ \text{OBJ} & [\text{PRED} \quad \text{‘dog’}] \end{bmatrix}$$

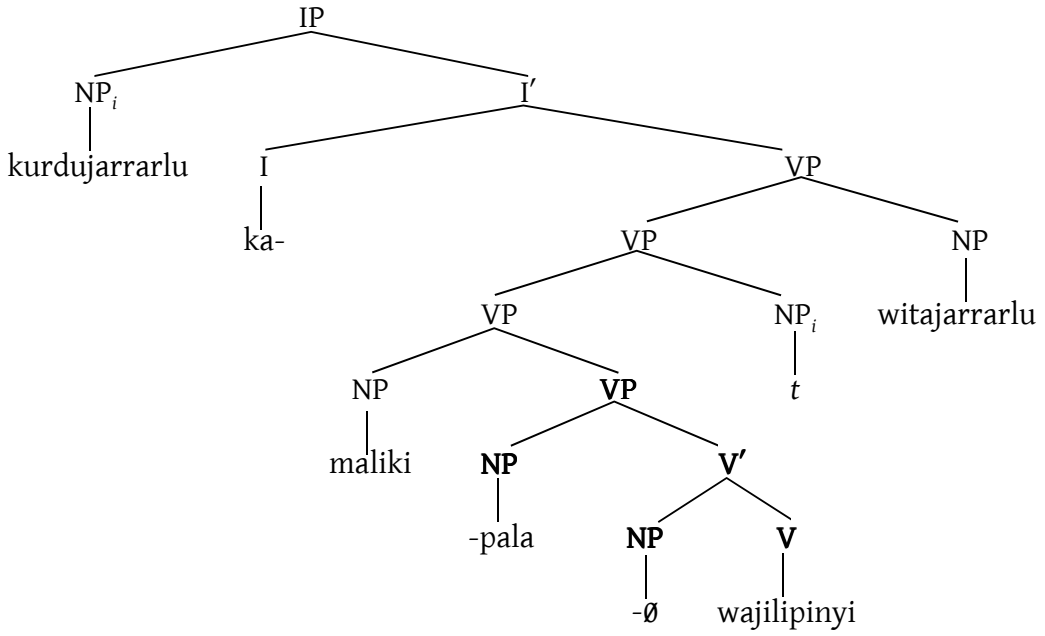
The mapping between constituent structure and grammatical functions is mediated by case. Since both *kurdujarrarlu* ‘two children’ and *witajarrarlu* ‘two small ones’ are marked with ergative case, and Warlpiri does not distinguish between nouns and adjectives, the two constituents together can function as the subject.

An Alternative View

Some researchers have argued that all languages are configurational. According to this approach, in a language like Warlpiri, pronominal agreement markers or unexpressed pronouns (pro) that trigger agreement are the real arguments of the verb. The NPs that we see are adjuncts which are identified with the pronominal arguments, differently in different implementations. As adjuncts, they can occur anywhere. Some parametric property of Universal Grammar blocks lexical NPs from being arguments. This idea, which was first proposed by Jelinek (1984), has been implemented in various ways. We will not discuss the details, such as how the adjuncts are identified with arguments. Here are two possible trees, the first adapted from Speas (1990) and the second based on the structures proposed for Mohawk by Baker (1996).



Configurationality, p. 4



The Alternative View is Wrong

Based on Austin and Bresnan (1996) and Nordlinger (1998):

Arguments which do not trigger agreement (e.g. additional object of ditransitive) appear obligatorily. This should not be possible if non-pronominal nouns cannot appear as arguments.

Pronouns have to be definite; non-pronominal arguments can be interpreted either as definite or indefinite.

Some Australian languages (such as Jiwarli) have all the properties of Warlpiri except that there is no agreement. So agreement cannot be a crucial part of the system.

The adjunct analysis goes along with the discontinuous constituents. But in some languages (such as Kayardild) discontinuous constituents are not allowed, even though they have all the other properties.

Cases on NPs are determined lexically by verbs, which would not be expected if the overt NPs are adjuncts

Null pronouns occur in infinitives, which lack aux and thus lack agreement

Overt pronouns are just as free in their positioning as non-pronouns

In Jiwarli, the rules for case-marking adjuncts are different from those for arguments, so the "arguments" couldn't really be adjuncts.

Configurationality, p. 5

Students are ***very strongly*** encouraged to read Austin and Bresnan (1996) (there is a link on the course web site, but it will only work if you are using a university server.) Ignore the stuff about split-ergative case marking.

References

Austin, Peter and Joan Bresnan (1996) "Non-Configurationality in Australian Aboriginal Languages." *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 14: 215–68.

Baker, Mark C. (1996) *The Polysynthesis Parameter*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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Speas, Margaret J. (1990) *Phrase Structure in Natural Language*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.