The Syntax of the Hakka Language

I. Introduction

My native language is Hakka, a language I don’t know much about except that I have spoken this language since my very first word. Since I am required to do a paper on a different language other than English, it is only logical to me to spend some time and find out more about my native language, my primary language—the language my parents taught me.

Today I consider myself multilingual because I can speak Hakka, Cantonese, and English fluently. Though Hakka is very similar to both Cantonese and Mandarin—the more commonly used Chinese languages—speaking in Hakka is more natural and is easier for me because it is a language that I had more than 20 years of experience with and that I use everyday to communicate with my parents. I will focus my paper on the syntax of the Hakka language because I can use my own native knowledge as well as my parents and siblings.

Hakka is a language from Mainland China under the classification of Sino-Tibetan and Chinese. It is spoken in many parts of Mainland China side by side with other dialects. The greatest concentration of speakers is in eastern and northeastern Guangdong, otherwise especially in Fujian, Jiangxi, Guangxi, Hunan, and Sichuan. Also spoken in Brunei, French Guiana, French Polynesia, Indonesia (Java and Bali), Malaysia (Peninsular), Mauritius, New Zealand, Panama, Singapore, South Africa, Suriname, Taiwan, Thailand, United Kingdom, and the United States. A schematic map of Hakka distribution is provided.

A population of 25,725,000 in Mainland China, 2.5% of the population (1984) speaks Hakka. A total population of all countries that speaks Hakka is 33,000,000 (1999 WA).

II. Basic Word Order

*[c] represents the vowel sound found in ‘port’, ‘more’, ‘soar’, and ‘poor’. (I cannot find the backward ‘c’ on my keyboard.)

*[e] represents the vowel sound found in ‘about’, ‘Rosa’, ‘money’, and ‘fun’. (I cannot find the upside down ‘e’ on my keyboard.)

Hakka is a language that prefers the subject, verb, direct object form—SVO word order. Below are examples of the SVO word order in Hakka:

1. ngaj sæt sij nij gejk gow.
   [ŋgâj] [sæt] [sij] [nîj] [gějk] [gōw]
   ‘I’ ‘kill’ ‘dead’ ‘your’ ‘2nd person particle’ ‘dog’
   *I kill your dog.*
2. ngaį gejį ger tdeį ngaį.

[ngaį] [gėjį] [gėr] [tdėk] [ngaį]
‘I’ ‘1st person particle’ ‘older brother’ ‘kick’ ‘I’
My brother kicked me.

3. ngaį peų juw tėg der ngaį ham kij.

[ngaį] [pėn] [jūw] [tėn] [dėr] [ngaį] [hūm] [kį]
My friend heard me calling.

4. ngaį hcrn der jįt džæk del džeg.

[ngaį] [hčrn] [dėr] [jiįt] [džėk] [dėl] [džėg].
‘I’ ‘see’ ‘reach’ ‘one’ ‘of’ ‘bird’ ‘little’
I see a bird.

5. hcr der ɲįįŋ siŋ ngaį.

[hčr] [dɛr] [ɲįįŋ n] [siŋ] [ngaį]
‘very’ ‘many’ ‘people’ ‘believe’ ‘I’
A lot of people believe me.

Although the SVO word order is preferred and more common in Hakka, sometimes the SOV word order is used. An example follows:

1. kįj low kįj gejį lcr per tel muw.

[kįį] [lòw] [kįį] [gejį] [lɛɛ] [tɛɛl] [muw]
‘he’ ‘with’ ‘his’ ‘3rd person particle’ ‘old’ ‘lady’ ‘jump’ ‘move’
He dances with his wife.

2. ngaį low kįj jiįt tʃɛt tʃɛr.

[ngaį] [lòw] [kįj] [jiįt] [tʃɛt] [tʃɛr]
‘I’ ‘with’ ‘him/her’ ‘one’ ‘gather’ ‘sit’
I am sitting with him.

III. Phrasal Word Order

Hakka is a language that contains preposition rather than postpositions. The prepositional phrases are head-initial. Below are two examples:

1. fuŋ tęp tʃɛrd tɛłt mɛn.

[fũŋ] [tɛp] [tʃɛrd] [tɛlt] [mɛŋ]
‘put’ ‘plate’ ‘on’ ‘table’ ‘top’
Put the plate on top of the table.

2. ngaį hɛŋ ger hejit.

[ngaį] [hɛŋ] [gɛr] [hɛjit]
‘I’ ‘walk’ ‘across’ ‘river’
I walk across the river.
When saying a phrase with ‘want + verb’, Hakka stays consistent with the head-initial order. Examples are followed.

1. **nij seŋ hij mæ?**
   
   [nǐj] [sēŋ] [hīj] [mæ]
   
   ‘you’ ‘want’ ‘go’ ‘question particle’
   
   Do you want to go?

2. **ngañ seŋ hak.**

   [ngañ] [sēŋ] [hàk]
   
   ‘I’ ‘want’ ‘learn’
   
   I want to learn.

When dealing with relative clauses, Hakka stays consistent with the head-initial order. Examples are illustrated below:

1. **gējk dʒæg lar ngañ tʃæp njijt hcrn dcr gējk tʃuw gējk teŋ.**

   [gējk] [dʒæɡ] [lær] [ngañ] [tʃæp] [njijt] [hcrn] [dcr] [gējk] [tʃuw] [gējk] [teŋ]
   
   ‘that’ ‘piece’ ‘man’ ‘I’ ‘day before’ ‘day’ ‘see’ ‘reach’ ‘2nd person particle’ ‘live’ ‘that’ ‘there’
   
   The old man, who I saw yesterday, lives there.

2. **gējk mej dʒæg kij dʒuwŋ jij gējk low ngañ jijt tʃet hij towt suw.**

   [gējk] [mej] [dʒæɡ] [kij] [dʒuwŋ][jiʃ] [gējk] [lów] [ngañ] [jiʃt] [tʃet] [hij] [tòwt][sùw]
   
   
   The girl, who he loves, goes to school with me.

For the sentence, “I saw the old man yesterday,” the ‘old man’ is the object. But, in the relative clause, “The old man that I saw yesterday,” ‘that old man’ gets moved to the beginning of the sentence, using the word [gējk] to start off the sentence. However, the sentence is fragmented in Hakka. Examples are illustrated below:

1. **ngañ tʃæp njijt hcrn dcr gējk lar.**

   [ngañ] [tʃæp] [njijt] [hcrn] [dcr] [gējk] [lær]
   
   ‘I’ ‘day before’ ‘day’ ‘see’ ‘reach’ ‘that’ ‘man’
   
   I saw the old man yesterday.

2. **gējk lar ngañ tʃæp njijt hcrn dcr.**

   [gējk] [lær] [ngañ] [tʃæp] [njijt] [hcrn] [dcr]
   
   ‘that’ ‘man’ ‘I’ ‘day before’ ‘day’ ‘see’ ‘reach’
   
   The old man that I saw yesterday.

For the sentence, “The girl knows me,” ‘the girl’ is the subject. Similarly in the relative clause, “The girl who knows me,” ‘the girl’ stays as the subject and the two sentences stay the same in Hakka. Both of these sentences begin with the word [gējk]. Examples are shown below:
1. gements mej dzeg dijd ngaj.

[gement] [mi] [dzeg] [dijd] [ngaj]
‘that’ ‘girl’ ‘little’ ‘know’ ‘I’
_The girl knows me._

2. gements mej dzeg dijd ngaj.

[gement] [mi] [dzeg] [dijd] [ngaj]
‘that’ ‘girl’ ‘little’ ‘know’ ‘I’
_The girl who knows me._

In the sentence, “I gave the old man a plate,” ‘the old man’ is the indirect object. In the relative clause, “The old man I gave a plate to,” ‘the old man’ gets moved to the beginning of the sentence and starts off with the word _gement_ as well. However, the relative clause is a fragmented sentence in Hakka. Examples are followed:

1. ngaj buwn gement lar jijt dzeg tept.

[ngaj] [buwn] [gement] [lur] [jjt] [dzeg] [tept]
‘I’ ‘give’ ‘3rd person particle’ ‘man’ ‘one’ ‘of’ ‘plate’
_I gave the old man a plate._

2. gement lar ngaj buwn dzar jijt dzeg tept.

[gement] [lur] [ngaj] [buwn] [dzar] [jjt] [dzeg] [tept]
‘that’ ‘man’ ‘I’ ‘give’ ‘done’ ‘one’ ‘of’ ‘plate’
_The old man I gave a plate to._

In the sentence, “I climbed up the tree,” ‘the tree’ is the object of a prepositional phrase. In the relative clause, “The tree I climbed up,” ‘the tree’ gets moved to the beginning of the sentence and again begins with the word _gement_. This sentence is fragmented in Hakka as well. Examples are illustrated below:

1. ngaj pep san mek.

[ngaj] [pep] [san] [mek]
‘I’ ‘climb’ ‘up’ ‘tree’
_I climbed up the tree._

2. gement mek ngaj pep san.

[gement] [mek] [ngaj] [pep] [san]
‘that’ ‘tree’ ‘I’ ‘climb’ ‘up’
_The tree I climbed up._

For verb phrases in Hakka, the word order follows the V PP, Manner Adverb before V, and V before Manner Adverb and in the case of V and Embedded Clauses the verb is head initial. Examples are shown below:
1. kij dɔawt tʃut gajg luw.
   He ran out to the street.

2. kij dɔawt her fajt.
   He runs quickly.

3. kij set set sæg dɔawt lɔŋ gert.
   He quietly came over here.

4. kij dʒuŋ jij tʃat hejt jæk sot.
   He likes to swim in the ocean.

In noun phrases, the head noun comes before the relative clause, as seen in previous examples. Also, numbers, demonstratives, adjectives, and articles come before noun phrases, like in English. Following are some examples of these cases.

1. tʃiŋt dʒæk njij sɛŋ hiŋ.
   Seven people want to go.

2. ɡeŋk lɔr hed pɛŋ dʒar.
   That man is sick.

3. ngaj juw jijt dʒæk del dʒeqg.
   I have a bird.

4. sem dʒæk fiŋt mɛŋ dʒeqg dʒuw jijt pʊŋ tajd tʃet.
   Three fat girls chased a big car.

In Hakka, the possessor usually comes before the possessed. However, if the possessed comes before the possessor, an additional marker would be used. The word, [ɡeŋg], would be used after the possessor. When the possessor comes before the possessed, they are always linked.
by a word. The word, [gējk], is used, it is used in cases where the possessor is a pronoun, a full NP, a body part or family relation, and also in cases where the possessed is not a body part or family relation. Examples are below:

1. **ngaj gejk ʂo.**
   
   [ŋgâj] [gējk] [jû]
   ‘I’ ‘1st person particle’ ‘book’
   *My book.*

2. **kij gejk ʂo.**
   
   [kîj] [gējk] [jû]
   ‘he/she’ ‘3rd person particle’ ‘book’
   *His book.*

3. **gejk bûŋ ʂo hed kij gejŋ.**
   
   [gējk] [bûŋ] [jû] [hêd] [kîj] [gêjŋ]
   ‘that’ ‘article’ ‘book’ ‘is’ ‘he/she’ ‘possessive’
   *That book is his.*

4. **ngaj gejk bæ.**
   
   [ŋgâj] [gējk] [bê]
   ‘I’ ‘1st person particle’ ‘dad’
   *My dad.*

5. **ngaj gejk sîl.**
   
   [ŋgâj] [gējk] [sîl]
   ‘I’ ‘1st person particle’ ‘hand’
   *My hand.*

6. **kij dʒûŋŋ jîj ngaj gejk tʃæt.**
   
   [kîj] [dʒûŋŋ] [jîj] [ŋgâj] [gējk] [ʃæt]
   ‘he/she’ ‘like’ ‘like’ ‘I’ ‘1st person particle’ ‘car’
   *He likes my car.*

### IV. Conclusion

Hakka is a spoken language that was first found in South Asia and was then spread to many different areas in the world. What is amazing about this language is that it developed into a different dialect in different regions. Though Hakka is spoken differently in different areas, the dialects are similar enough for anyone who speaks and understands one version of Hakka would also be able to understand the rest of the dialects of Hakka. And since Hakka is similar to Mandarin and Cantonese, some words and sentences are the same, however, because it does not have a written form, the syntax may be more flexible than the rest of the common Chinese languages.