81 Order of Subject, Object, and Verb

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1 Defining the values

This map shows the ordering of subject, object, and verb in a transitive clause, more specifically declarative clauses in which both the subject and object involve a noun (and not just a pronoun), as in the English sentence in (1).

(1) [The dog] chased [the cat].
S V O

English is SVO (Subject-Verb-Object), because the subject the dog in (1) precedes the verb while the object the cat follows the verb.

There are six logically possible orders of the three elements S, O, and V, as shown in the feature-value box:

- 1. Subject-Object-Verb (SOV)
- 2. Subject-Verb-Object (SVO)
- 3. Verb-Subject-Object (VSO)
- 4. Verb-Object-Subject (VOS)
- 5. Object-Subject-Verb (OSV)
- 6. Object-Verb-Subject (OVS)
- 7. Lacking a dominant word order

All six of these types are attested; examples of each type are given in (2).

(2) a. Japanese (Kuno 1973: 10)

John ga tegami o yon-da.
John subj letter obj read-3pl

‘John read the letter.’

b. Mandarin (Li and Thompson 1981: 217)

Zhangsan receive-perf one-clf letter
S V O

‘Zhangsan received a letter.’

c. Irish (Dillon and Ó Críostín 1961: 166)

Léann [na séargat] [na leabhair] read-pres the.pl priest.pl the.pl book.pl
V S O

‘The priests are reading the books.’

d. Nias (Austronesian, Sumatra, Indonesia; Brown 2001: 538)

v-rino cukke ung-ku 3pl-realh-cook durrice mother-1sg.poss
V O S

‘My mother cooked rice.’

e. Hixkaryana (Carib; Brazil, Derbyshire 1979: 87)

to-te y-a-hau-ye kamara
man 3.3-grab-distant.pst jaguar
O V S

‘The jaguar grabbed the man.’

f. Ndebe (Vupé-Japú; Brazil; Weir 1994: 309)

swad kalapé-heap jaguar child second
O S V

‘The child sees the jaguar.’

Although all six of these orders are attested, the last two types, OVS and OSV, in which the object comes first, are rare.

The terms subject and object are used here in a rather informal semantic sense, to denote the more agent-like and more patient-like elements respectively. Their use can be defined in terms of the notions S, A, and P, where the S is the single argument in an intransitive clause, the A is the more agent-like argument in a transitive clause, and the P is the more patient-like argument in a transitive clause. For the purposes of this map, then, the term subject is used for the A while the term object is used for the P. A language shown on the map as SOV could thus also be equally well and perhaps more accurately described as APV. Note that many linguists use the terms subject and object somewhat differently from this, and some linguists question the applicability of these terms to some languages, but these issues do not arise with the use of these terms here. For example, there is controversy surrounding the question of what ought to be considered the subject in Philippine languages, like Cebuano (cf. Schachtier 1976). Cebuano has two common ways to express transitive clauses, one of which is illustrated in (3).

(3) Cebuano (Austronesian; own data)

gi-palit [a sa babayay] [lang saging]
GOLL.FOC-BUY NONTOP woman TOP banana

‘The woman bought the bananas.’

While there is a question as to which of the two arguments in (3) should be considered a subject (or whether neither or both should), in both types of clauses the verb normally comes first, followed by the A, and then the P. Hence, by the use of subject and object assumed for this map, Cebuano is treated as a VSO language.

Note that while the position of the subject in intransitive clauses is generally the same as in transitive clauses, in some languages this is not the case. See Chapter 82.

Some languages can be assigned straightforwardly to one of the six types, because all orders other than one are either ungrammatical or used relatively infrequently and only in special pragmatic contexts. Such languages can be said to have rigid order. There are many other languages in which all six orders are grammatical. Such languages can be said to have flexible order. Flexible order languages are sometimes described as having “free” word order, though this is misleading, since there are often pragmatic factors governing the choice of word order.

We can further distinguish two subtypes of languages with flexible word order. In some languages with flexible order, there is one order which is most common and which can be described as the dominant order. In other flexible order languages, the flexibility is greater and there is no one order that is the dominant order in terms of frequency of usage or pragmatic neutrality. Flexible order languages in which one order is dominant are shown on the map according to that dominant order – in other words, the map does not distinguish rigid order languages from flexible order languages with a dominant order. Flexible order languages lacking a dominant order are shown on the map as “lacking a dominant word order”. Russian is an example of a language with flexible word order in which SVO order can be considered dominant, so Russian is shown on the map as SVO. See the box section “Determining Dominant Word Order” on p. 371.

There are a number of different subtypes of languages lacking a dominant order which are not distinguished on the map. In some languages with highly flexible word order, all or most orders of subject, object, and verb will be possible and common. Nunggubuyu (Gunwinyguan, northern Australia) is an example of such a language (Heath 1984: 307–13; 1986). But some languages lack a dominant order only because just the subject or just the object exhibits flexibility with respect to the verb. For example, Syrian Arabic allows both SVO and VSO orders and there does not seem to be a reason (at least on the basis of the description by Cowell 1964: 407, 411) to consider one of them dominant. However, only these two orders are common and the order of verb and object is relatively inflexible.

A third subtype of language lacking a dominant order consists of languages in which different word orders occur but the choice is
syntactically determined. For example, in German and Dutch, the
dominant order is SVO in main clauses lacking an auxiliary and
SOV in subordinate clauses and clauses containing an auxiliary (see
Chapter 83 for examples). Because this results in both orders being
common, neither order is considered dominant here and these two
languages are shown on the map as lacking a dominant word order.
In general, if the word order varies according to whether there is an
auxiliary verb, the language is shown on the map as lacking a dominant
order. Another language whose word order depends both on whether
there is an auxiliary and whether the clause is a main clause is Dinka
(Nilotic; Sudan): like German, the order is SVO in main clauses
without an auxiliary, SAuxOV in main clauses with an auxiliary, but
it is VSO in subordinate clauses without an auxiliary and AuxSOV
in subordinate clauses with an auxiliary (Nebel 1948: 9, 25, 42, 75, 82).

Where languages differ in their order between main clauses and
subordinate clauses, the order in main clauses is used to classify
them on this map. For example, Quileute (Chimakuan; Washington
State) is VSO in main clauses and SVO in subordinate clauses
(Andrade 1933: 278), and is shown on the map as VSO. In some
languages, word order is more fixed in subordinate clauses. For
every, in Miya (Chadic; Nigeria), while both SVO and VOS are
found in main clauses, only VOS order is found in adverbial sub-
ordinate clauses and relative clauses (Schuh 1998: 281, 291), because
both SVO and VOS are common in main clauses, Miya is shown on
the map as lacking a dominant order.

2 Geographical distribution
The most frequent of the six orders is SOV and it is widely dis-
tributed across the globe. Perhaps the most striking region in which
SOV predominates is an area covering most of Asia, except in
South-East Asia and the Middle East. It is also overwhelmingly the
dominant order in New Guinea, most of the exceptions being along
the north coast. It is the most common order among languages in
Australia which have a dominant order at all, although even in
languages in which SOV is dominant, the order is generally flexible.
It is clearly the dominant order in North America outside of the
Pacific North-West and Mesoamerica.

The map shows three areas where SVO order predominates:
(i) an area covering much of sub-Saharan Africa, though with a
scattering of SOV and VSO languages; (ii) an area extending from
China and South-East Asia south into the Austronesian languages
of Indonesia and the western Pacific; and (iii) Europe and around
the Mediterranean. SVO order is not common outside these areas.

VSO order is scattered around various parts of the world, in east-
ern Africa (among various Eastern Sudanic languages), in North
Africa (Berber), in the western extremes of Europe (Celtic), in and
around the Philippines, among Polynesian languages of the Pacific,
in Mesoamerica, and in the Pacific North-West. VOS order is also
scattered around the globe, though there are no attested instances
on the mainland of Africa or Eurasia.

There are nine OVS languages on the map, six of which are spoken
in South America, five in the Amazon basin, and one (Selknam) in
Tierra del Fuego. There are only four OSV languages shown: Warao
in Venezuela, Nádebe in Brazil, Wàk Ngahthana in northeastern Aus-
tralia, and Tobati in West Papua, Indonesia. Languages without a
dominant order are especially common in North America and Aus-
tralia, and to a lesser extent in South America. The scattering of this
type partly reflects the fact that this is not a homogeneous type, since
it mixes languages with highly flexible order with languages which
have more rigid order but where there are two dominant orders. The
former type, languages with highly flexible order, is most common
in North America and Australia and relatively uncommon in Africa,
Europe, Asia, New Guinea, and among Austronesian languages.

Map 81A shows the distribution of word order in various languages
of the past, though the times at which these languages were spoken
vary from 4500 years ago to 1000 years ago. The map illustrates the
fact that VSO, now a common order in Europe and around the Meditar-
anean, was less common in the past: on the one hand, there were
SOV languages like Latin and Italic in western Europe; on
the other hand, there were many VSO languages in what is now the
Middle East, represented both by Semitic languages and by Egyptian.

3 Theoretical discussion
While the feature shown on Map 81 is perhaps the single most
frequently cited typological feature of languages, it is now recog-
nized that it represents a clause type that does not occur especially
frequently in spoken language; it is more common that at least one
of the two arguments of a transitive clause will be pronominal, and
in many languages pronominal subjects are expressed by verbal
affixes. It is argued by Dryer (1997) that a more useful typology is
one based on two more basic features, whether the language is OV
or VO and whether it is SVO or SV: these are shown on the next two
maps, in Chapters 82 and 83. In addition, as noted above, the order
in transitive clauses is not always the same as the order in intransi-
tive clauses. The feature shown on this map is also important in that
many other features are predictable from it, at least statistically.
Most of these features correlate more specifically with the order of
object and verb (Greenberg 1963, Dryer 1992; see Chapters 95–97).
For a few features, SVO languages exhibit properties intermediate
between those of SOV languages and those of verb-initial languages,
though in general they are more similar to verb-initial languages
(Dryer 1991).