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)	497
🔴	2. Subject-Verb-Object (SVO)	435
🟡	3. Verb-Subject-Object (VSO)	85
◇	4. Verb-Object-Subject (VOS)	26
🔶	5. Object-Verb-Subject (OVS)	9
🔷	6. Object-Subject-Verb (OSV)	4
⚪	7. Lacking a dominant word order	172
	total	1228

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-PST
         S   O   V
         'John read the letter.'

     b. Mandarin (Li and Thompson 1981: 217)
         Zhāngsān   shōudáo-le   yi-fēng   xìn.
         Zhangsan   receive-PERF one-CLF   letter
         S   V   O
         'Zhangsan received a letter.'

     c. Irish (Dillon and Ó Cróinín 1961: 166)
         Léann   [na   sagairt]   [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)
         i-rino   vakhe   ina-gu
         3SG.REALIS-cook   ABS.rice   mother-1SG.POSS
         V   O   S
         'My mother cooked rice.'

     e. Hixkaryana (Carib; Brazil; Derbyshire 1979: 87)
         toto   y-ahosɨ-ye   kamara
         man   3:3-grab-DISTANT.PST   jaguar
         O   V   S
         'The jaguar grabbed the man.'

     f. Nadëb (Vaupés–Japurá; Brazil; Weir 1994: 309)
         awad   kalapéé   hapɨɨh
         jaguar   child   see.IND
         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 here 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. Schachter 1976). Cebuano has two common ways to express transitive clauses, one of which is illustrated in (3).

(3) Cebuano (Austronesian; own data)
     gi-palit   [sa   babayi]   [ang   saging]
     GOAL.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: 507–13; 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 example, in Miya (Chadic; Nigeria), while both SVO and VOS are found in main clauses, only VOS order is found in adverbial subordinate 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 distributed 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 eastern Africa (among various Eastern Sudanic languages), in North Africa (Berber), in the western extremes of Europe (Celtic), in and
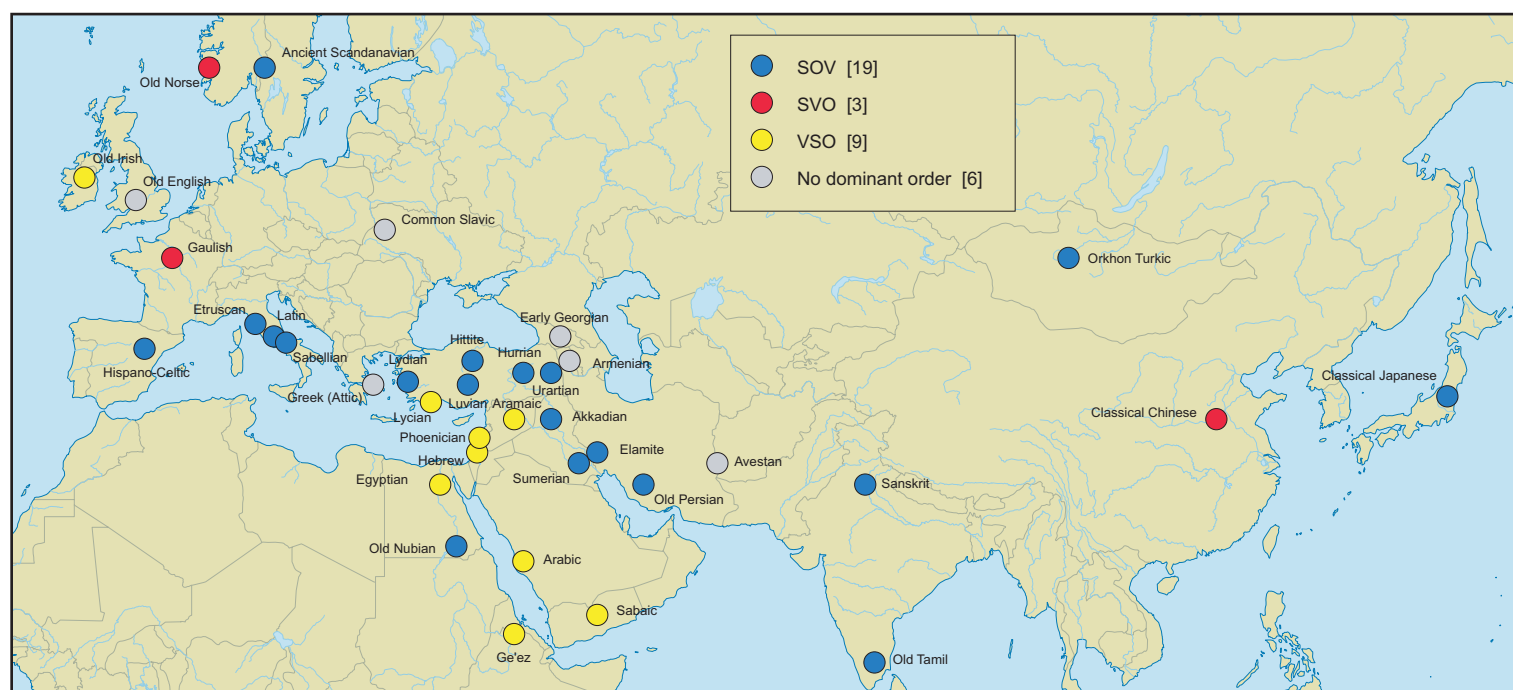
around the Philippines, among Polynesian languages of the Pacific, in Mesoamerica, and in the Pacific North-West. VOS order is also scattered around the globe, though there are no attested instances on the mainland of Africa or Eurasia.

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, Nadëb in Brazil, Wik Ngathana in northeastern Australia, and Tobati in West Papua, Indonesia. Languages without a dominant order are especially common in North America and Australia, 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 SVO, now a common order in Europe and around the Mediterranean, was less common in the past: on the one hand, there were SOV languages like Latin and Etruscan 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 recognized 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 SV or VS; 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 intransitive 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).

Map 81A Order of Subject, Object, and Verb in "Ancient" Languages