1 Word order typology

1.1 Relative order of S, O, and V

Relative order of S, O, and V

Typologically, it is common to describe languages in terms of the relative order of the subject (S), the object (O), and the verb (V). This gives rise to six logically possible types. Of these SOV and SVO are the most common, VSO is somewhat common—VOS, OVS, and OSV are much more rare.

(1) Hasan öküz-ü aldı
     Hasan ox-ACC bought
     'Hasan bought the ox.'   Turkish SOV

(2) The farmer killed the duckling   English SVO

(3) Lladdodd y ddraig y dyn.
     killed   the dragon the man
     'The dragon killed the man.'   Welsh VSO

Relative order of S, O, and V

(4) Nahita ny mpianatra ny vehivavy.
     saw   the student   the woman
     'The woman saw the student.'   Malagasy VOS

(5) Toto yahoɨsye   kamara.
     man it-grabbed-him jaguar
     'The jaguar grabbed the man.'   Hixkaryana OVS

1.2 Issues in determining word order

What's the *basic* word order? What's the subject?

There is agreement as to the basic word order of Turkish, Welsh, English, Malagasy, and Hixkaryana—but it is not always clear. In some languages, it seems like any permutation of the words is equally good, any preferences being very slight.

Also—what is the "subject"? Sometimes languages split on usual criteria for identifying a subject. (Ergative case pattern marks subjects of transitives differently than subjects of intransitives, syntactic tests like verb agreement don't always work, confounds with agent- and topic-hood.)

If some objects precede and some follow the verb

Exotic languages like French have some objects preceding the verb, while others follow it.

(6) a. Le garçon a   vu   la jeune fille.
      the boy   has seen the young girl
      'The boy has seen the young girl.'

   b. Le garçon l'a   vue.
      the boy   her-has seen
      'The boy has seen her.'

Turns out, this is fairly common: unstressed constituents (like clitic pronouns) often have their own positions. Here, the position of the object in (6b) is not taken to be the basic one.

What if the syntactic environment affects it?

German also presents a challenge, since it seems that the word order is most frequently SVO in main clauses, but SOV in embedded clauses.

(7) a. Der Mann   sah den Jungen.
      the man-NOM saw the boy-ACC
      'The man saw the boy.'

   b. Ich weiß, daß der Mann   den Jungen   sah.
      I   know that the manNOM the boyACC saw
      'I know that the man saw the boy.'

Which context is basic and which one is non-basic? Is the simple sentence (7a) basic? (Hint: no.) Cf. English subject-auxiliary inversion in questions.

Direct object, indirect object?

The usual way of categorizing languages refers to the position of the "object," but there are languages—this one is Kpelle—where the direct object goes on one side of the verb and the indirect object goes on another. So is Kpelle SOV or SVO?

(8)   a. È sɛŋ-kâu tèe k̀âloŋ-pɔ́.
          he money   sent chief-to
          'He sent the money to the chief.'

(In general, the direct object is the more likely candidate, being—even intuitively, I think—more basic than the indirect object. But it's still an answer that requires a bit of argument.)

2   Some other relative orders

2.1   Relative order of adjectives and nouns

Adjectives and nouns

Other things that seem to have different relative orderings—e.g., nouns and modifying adjectives.

(9)   The green table   English AN

(10)   büyük şekir
       large   city
       'large city'   Turkish AN

(11)   Le tapis   vert
       the carpet green
       'the green carpet'   French NA

(12)   llyfr bach
       book little
       'a little book'   Welsh NA

Exceptions

Languages with basic order NA are relatively tolerant of AN exceptions, Languages with basic order AN are not (cf. English *court marshal*).

(13)   Le petit prince
       the little prince
       'the little prince'   French (AN)

(14)   yr   hen wlad
       the old country
       'the old country'   Welsh (AN)

(Comrie's (1989) Welsh examples are probably intended as somewhat of a prank—but I checked with Google Translate, *bach* is indeed 'small'—not 'book,' and *wlad* is indeed 'country'—not 'old.')

2.2   Relative order of possessors and nouns

Possessors and nouns

(15)   The man's hat   English GN

(16)   kadın-ın   çavuğ-u
        woman-GEN chicken-her
        'the woman's chicken'   Turkish GN

(17)   la   plume de ma tante
        the pen   of my aunt
        'my aunt's pen'   French NG

(18)   het y   dyn
        hat the man
        'the man's hat'   Welsh NG

Exceptions

   English has two ways to form a possessive construction, one with order GN (called the Norman genitive, inconveniently for mnemonic purposes) and the other with order NG (called the Saxon genitive).

(19)   a. The man's hat   Norman genitive GN
        b. The roof of the house   Saxon genitive NG

   The Norman genitive is more frequent, and has become more frequent through the history of English—but, still, there is a question as to whether English should properly be characterized as (just one of) NG or GN.

2.3   Relative order of adpositions and nouns

Adpositions

(20)   in the house   English preposition

(21) adam-için
      man-for
      'for the man'   Turkish postposition

(22) yn y tŷ
      in the house
      'in the house'   Welsh preposition

(An "adposition" is the category under which prepositions and postpositions fall, when you want to refer to both.)

3   Dryers's (2007) discussion

Correlations

Though not logically necessary, there do seem to be strong tendencies, even some apparently absolute correlations, between some of these parameters of variation.

Dryer (2007) also discusses: the position of manner adverbs (*loudly*) and "adverbial subordinators" (*because*, or *after*) with respect to the verb, and the order in comparative constructions (like *John is taller than Bill*). Dryer suggests that the answers a language gives to these questions seem to kind of go together.

3.1   SOV languages

Lezgian

Dryer gives some examples from Lezgian, suggesting that

- The basic order is SOV.

- Manner adverbs precede the verb.

- The adpositions are postpositions.

- Genitive noun phrases precede the noun they modify.

- In comparatives, the standard of comparison precedes the marker of comparison.

- Adverbial subordinators occur at the end of the modifying clause.

Slave and Siroi

Dryer then turns to look at Slave (northern Canada) and Siroi (Papua New Guinea), and finds the same pattern:

- The basic order is SOV.

- Manner adverbs precede the verb.

- The adpositions are postpositions.

- Genitive noun phrases precede the noun they modify.

- In comparatives, the standard of comparison precedes the marker of comparison.

- Adverbial subordinators occur at the end of the modifying clause.

3.2 Verb-initial languages

Fijian

Fijian appears to be VSO/VOS (both orders seem to be an option). Dryer finds rather different characteristics:

- The basic order is VSO.

- Manner adverbs *follow* the verb.

- The adpositions are *prepositions*.

- Genitive noun phrases *follow* the noun they modify.

- In comparatives, the standard of comparison *follows* the marker of comparison.

- Adverbial subordinators occur at the *beginning* of the modifying clause.

Turkana and Lealao Chinantec

Turkana is VSO and Lealao Chinantec is VOS. And they look like Fijian:

- The basic order is VSO.

- Manner adverbs *follow* the verb.

- The adpositions are *prepositions*.

- Genitive noun phrases *follow* the noun they modify.

- In comparatives, the standard of comparison *follows* the marker of comparison.

- Adverbial subordinators occur at the *beginning* of the modifying clause.

3.3 SVO languages

English

Neither verb-final nor verb-initial. We find:

- The basic order is SVO.

- Manner adverbs **follow** the verb.

- The adpositions are **pre**positions.

- Genitive noun phrases **(can) precede** the noun they modify.

- In comparatives, the standard of comparison **follows** the marker of comparison.

- Adverbial subordinators occur at the **beginning** of the modifying clause.

(With a bit of squishiness concerning where manner adverbs and genitive noun phrases go.)

SVO acts like verb-initial

Dryer makes the point that SVO language seem to have the same kinds of parameter settings as verb-initial languages (rather different from those of verb-final languages). SVO and verb-initial languages are somehow the same kind of thing. What do they have in common? (Say, disregarding the S?)

Hmong Njua: SVO, prepositional, VAdv, AdjMSt—but GN. **Tetelcingo Nahuatl:** SVO, prepositional, NG, AdjMStd, subordinator-initial.

3.4 Object-initial languages

Hixkaryana

Object-initial languages are very rare—too rare to say confidently what their general properties are. Hixkaryana is reportedly OVS—and Dryer doesn't believe we've yet located a reliable report of an OSV language.

Hixkaryana: OVS, postpositional, GN. We don't know all of the characteristics, but so far it seems more like SOV languages.

3.5 VO vs. OV

Verb-object order

From what we've seen so far, it seems that perhaps we've cut the languages too finely—if SVO acts like VSO/VOS, and OVS acts like VSO, then perhaps what we're really looking at is a difference between whether a language is OV or VO. That is:

OV	VO
AdvV	VAdv
postpositions	prepositions
GN	NG
StMAdj	AdjMSt
Clause-Comp	Comp-Clause

4 Explaining the patterns

Why does so much correlate with VO vs. OV?

If all of these things go together, there should be some kind of explanation for that. The fact that VO/OV correlates well with prepositions vs. postpositions and with Clause-Comp order suggests that there is a "head direction parameter" that a language has more system-wide.
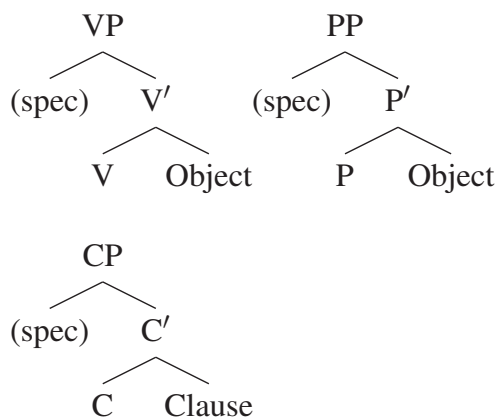
Can't be just one head parameter

If the usual understanding of German is correct—that it is an (S)OV language, but with a special property in the main clause that puts the tensed verb in C and a topic in the specifier of CP, then clearly the German CP is head-initial, even if its VP is head-final. Its PP is also head-initial (prepositions).

So it must be possible for the headedness of phrases to differ—but given the tendency for them to pattern together across languages, it must be "marked" for headedness to differ.

Other syntactic operations

There are also other things syntacticians hypothesize differ between languages. One such point of variation is whether the (main) verb moves up to I, to the left of adverbs in head-initial languages, but not changing the order in head-final languages.
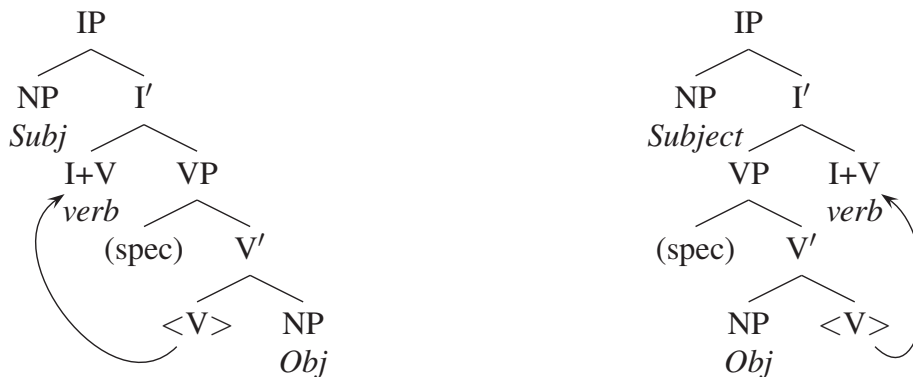
NG vs. GN

The same kind of explanation might underlie the correlation between OV and GN—in an OV language, heads are final, including N. Even if N moves somewhere up the tree, it will still remain after the possessor.

Meanwhile, in a VO language, N is initial (though still presumed to follow the possessor in the underlying structure). If N doesn't move anywhere, we have GN, but if N does move, we could get NG.

And this is basically the pattern: OV predicts GN, but VO doesn't really predict whether it will be GN or NG.

Verb-initial languages

Verb-initial languages have fairly strong correlations. Greenberg called it an absolute language universal that if a language is VSO, it will be prepositional. Why absolute?

The very fact that a language is verb-initial already tells us a number of things. It tells us that the verb moves (because it doesn't start out before the subject no matter what), and that it moves to a higher head in the structure that is initial. While headedness *can* differ, PPs and CPs pretty much always pattern together (cf. German). So VSO languages are also always prepositional.

References

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