

An Essay About Word Order

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“Words are sacred. They deserve respect. If you get the right ones, in the right order, you can nudge the world a little” [1]. The order of words is one of the most fundamental aspects of sentence construction in any language. Word order can change the spirit, meaning, or fluency of a sentence. The essay below will explain further details about word order in linguistics.

Constituent word order is defined in terms of a verb (**V**) in combination with two arguments: subject (**S**), and object(**O**). Nowadays, there are six logically possible basic word orders:

- Subject-object-verb (**SOV**): used by about half of the world.
- Subject-verb-object (**SVO**): deployed by about one-third of the world’s languages. Including English and Vietnamese.
- And a small fraction of languages uses less common word orders: VSO, VOS, OVS, and OSV.

Word Order	Number (2005)	Percentage (2005)	Number (2013)	Percentage (2013)
SOV	497	40.5%	565	41.0%
SVO	435	35.4%	488	35.4%
VSO	85	6.9%	95	6.9%
VOS	26	2.1%	25	1.8%
OVS	9	0.7%	11	0.8%
OSV	4	0.3%	4	0.3%
Unfixed	172	14.0%	189	13.7%

Figure 1: The distribution of linguistics word orders
[2]

As English is the most commonly spoken language in the world, we will focus on the SVO word order. **S** (subject) here is understood to be *nouns*, thus a possible sentence abiding by **SVO** order is as follows:

I like cookies.
Subject + Verb + Object

Therefore, any clauses like “I cookies like” is grammatically incorrect in English literature as it follows SOV structure.

As aforementioned, word order plays a vital role in delivering the spirit of coherence of the sentence. Let us consider two sentences below:

I gave John a cookie.
I gave a cookie to John.

In the former sentence, it is clear that our purpose is to focus on the object (*cookie*), whereas the latter brings more emphasis to the *person* receiving the object. Therefore, we can flexibly alter the position of objects to shift the reader's focus on what we desire.

In terms of meaning, word order can have a strong impact on the whole concept of the sentence. Now consider the following two sentences:

He genuinely needs to do that.

He needs to do that genuinely.

Both sentences use the same words yet convey completely different meanings. The first one signifies that the person really needs to do something. Meanwhile, the second was more like a warning that he needs to do something honestly.

Between the subject and the object in a sentence, we can add attributes, phrases, and clauses to deliver more information to the readers. However, we should never deviate too far from the basic format or add too much information to confuse readers about the main topic of the sentence. For example:

John Lennon wrote one of the most beautiful love songs ever to his wife Yoko.

John Lennon, an English singer, songwriter, musician, wrote many songs in his life and also one of the most beautiful love songs ever to his wife Yoko.

It is clear in the first sentence that we want readers to pay attention to the information "wrote one of the most beautiful love songs to his wife". However, the main information of the second one is rather vague, readers have no idea which information to concentrate on.

Our goal is to *put the most important information to the beginning of a sentence, or begin with a familiar thing and put the new information to the end*. Following this structure, we can lead our readers through a coherent story and will be more likely to deliver our ideas. Moreover, this structure can also attribute to the reason why SVO and SOV (*subject-first orderings*) are the most commonly used word order in the world. Concretely, let us have a look at the sentences below:

X is a new algorithm for the TS problem.

The probabilities are updated by the Bayes Theorem. This rule can be expressed by:...

In the first sentence, we want our readers to focus on the newly discovered algorithm, thus we may put this at the very beginning of the sentence. In terms of the latter one, *Bayes' Theorem* is a newly introduced concept, therefore placing the terminology at the end of the sentence will avoid overwhelming our readers.

When it comes to word order, there is one important aspect of English grammar: **Adjectives order**. The ordering of adjectives may frequently confuse many non-native English learners. For example, the sentence "He was wearing a red amazing coat" sounds correct in the first place. However, if we follow the ordering rule of English adjectives, it should be "He was wearing an amazing red coat." In general, the most usual sequence of adjectives is: **OSASCOMP** (Opinion - Size - Age - Shape - Colour - Origin - Material - Purpose).

Besides, we may need to be aware of some common grammatical mistakes in word order. For example, the adverbs and prepositional phrases occur in the following order: **way, place, time**:

The values can be updated in linear time easily.

The values can be updated easily in linear time.

Both sentences sound reasonable, however, the first one is actually grammatically incorrect, as the way (*easily*) should stand in front of time (*time*).

To conclude, there are various aspects of word order in English and general literature. Word order is an irreplaceable component of any language and plays a vital role in maintaining a coherent point of view and orienting messages to readers.

References

- [1] Tom Stoppard.
- [2] Wikipedia. *Word Order*. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word_order.