

## **Word Order in Kabyle: Free or Fixed?**

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Kabyle is a Berber<sup>1</sup> language spoken in northern Algeria, especially in the city of Béjaïa and the Atlas Mountains. This language family — the centre of a rich indigenous culture in northern Africa — belongs to their own subtree within the greater Afroasiatic language family (Wolff, n.d.). In this paper, I provide a baseline description for word order in Kabyle. This description is based on data collected during elicitations with a consultant who is fluent in the language, but also speaks French, Arabic and English. While Kabyle has its own script, I have written all examples using the IPA (except for the Kabyle given names Imene and Ilyes, which are capitalised). The exact pronunciation of the examples is irrelevant to understanding their syntactic properties.

Kabyle has a masculine-feminine noun class system, mandatory subject pronoun-dropping, and uses inflectional morphology on verbs to indicate tense, agreement and negation.

### Basic Word Order

In order to understand basic Subject-Object-Verb word order in Kabyle, I asked my consultant how one might say “Imene eats honey.” She responded in SVO: “Imene ɛtsɪf θɛmɪmθ.” I then repeated the phrase back to her with other word order permutations, and asked how grammatical they sounded.

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<sup>1</sup> The consultant did not like referring to her language with the exonym “Berber,” preferring to use “Kabyle” instead.

(1) *Translations of “IMENE eats honey”*

- |    |                    |    |                     |
|----|--------------------|----|---------------------|
| a. | IMENE tsɪtʃ θɛmimθ | d. | *θɛmimθ tsɪtʃ IMENE |
|    | Imene eats honey   |    | honey eats IMENE    |
| b. | tsɪtʃ IMENE θɛmimθ | e. | *IMENE θɛmimθ tsɪtʃ |
|    | eats IMENE honey   |    | IMENE honey eats    |
| c. | tsɪtʃ θɛmimθ IMENE | f. | *θɛmimθ IMENE tsɪtʃ |
|    | eats honey Imene   |    | honey IMENE eats    |

She found SVO (1a), VSO (1b) and VOS (1c) permutations to be grammatical. On the other hand, OSV (1e), SOV (1d) and OVS (1f) were outright ungrammatical for the intended meaning. Seemingly, word order is neither completely fixed nor completely free in Kabyle. The consultant did note that OVS would be grammatical for the — more bizarre — meaning “the honey is eating Imene.” The order of the arguments in this construction is what indicates their thematic role, not any case-marking or verb agreement. Imene being placed before honey in (1a) is the only way for one to understand that Imene is agentive while honey is patientive. This renders some permutations impossible.

I later tested various word order permutations in complex clauses. To my consultant, SVO and VSO were both optionally valid in a matrix clause (2) or subordinate clause (3).

(2) *Matrix Clause*

- a.     mi    ji-tʃ       ILYES   ɛksum [θ-su       IMENE   ɛmɛn]  
          when M.SG-eat ILYES.M meat   F.SG-drink IMENE.F water  
          “When Ilyes eats meat, Imene drinks water”

- b. mi ILYES ji-tʃ ɛksu[m] [θ-su IMENE ɛmən]  
 when ILYES.M M.SG-eat meat F.SG-drink IMENE.F water  
 “When Ilyes eats meat, Imene drinks water”

(3) *Subordinate Clause*

- a. mið jɪmɛs θ-ɛχðɪm ɛksu[m] [ILYES ji-tʃ ɛksu[m]  
 because mother.his F.3SG-make meat ILYES.M M.3SG-eat meat  
 “Ilyes eats meat because his mother makes meat”
- b. mið jɪmɛs θ-ɛχðɪm ɛksu[m] [ji-tʃ ILYES ɛksu[m]  
 because mother.his F.3SG-make meat M.3SG-eat ILYES.M meat  
 “Ilyes eats meat because his mother makes meat”

This data suggests that in Kabyle, one may move the subject around the sentence, creating a word order that is flexible between SVO, VOS and VSO. It remains a head-initial language, however, as the verb precedes the object in all cases.

### Effects on Verb Agreement

A notable observation of the flexible word order shown in (1) with the construction “Imene eats honey” is that neither the predicate nor its dependents changed morphologically when the subject was scrambled. So, I constructed sentences with differently gendered subjects and objects.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| (4) a. ILYES jɪ-tʃ θɛmimθ<br>Ilyes.M M-eat honey.F<br>“Ilyes eats honey” | b. IMENE sɪ-tʃ ækrum<br>Imene.F F-eat bread.M<br>“Imene eats bread” |
| (5) a. jɪ-tʃ ILYES θɛmimθ<br>M-eat Ilyes.M honey.F<br>“Ilyes eats honey” | b. sɪ-tʃ IMENE ækrum<br>F-eat Imene.F bread.M<br>“Imene eats bread” |

In (4a) the verb inflects with a masculine prefix to agree with its masculine subject “Ilyes” not with its feminine object “honey.” In (4b), the verb inflects with a feminine prefix to agree with its feminine subject “Imene” not with its masculine object “bread.” This illustrates that Kabyle has subject agreement, much like English. More importantly, this agreement does not change when switching from SVO (5a) to VSO (5b) — the same form of the predicate “eat” is used.

### Pragmatic Context of VOS

Interestingly, my consultant hesitated when I first tried a VOS phrase. According to her, this “sounds like a response to a question.” She felt it emphasises the object; in (6), that a *tree* is seen must be important. She also commented that it could be acceptable to simply drop the subject altogether and have just the verb and object. So, VOS is not as pragmatically neutral as SVO and VSO. She accepted this permutation as grammatical when spoken to her (6 and 7) — even outside responses to questions. Still, VOS was never the order of the translations she offered us by default, sticking instead to SVO and VSO.

(6) *Transitive Clause*

i-wɛlɔ ʃudʒra aqʒun

M.SG-see tree dog.M

“A dog sees a tree”

(7) *Response to “Does Imene eat bread?”*

ih tsɪ-tʃ æʁum IMENE

yes F.3SG-eat bread IMENE.F

“Yes, Imene eats bread”

So, a new question arose: how is VOS not confused with VSO? Perhaps Kabyle speakers can differentiate these structures because “Imene” has already been established as the subject. I decided to follow up with this by posing a question in Kabyle and asking for a possible response.

## (6) “What does IMENE eat?”

a. tsɪtʃ IMENE æʁum

eats IMENE bread

“Imene eats bread”

b. IMENE tsɪtʃ æʁum

IMENE eats bread

“Imene eats bread”

c. tsɪtʃ æʁum IMENE

eats bread IMENE

“Imene eats bread”

To the consultant, all three permutations in (6) were perfectly acceptable as responses, with no one preferred over the other. The flexible order here is likely a form of clause-internal scrambling, as movement can mark the importance of the subject pragmatically, but does not affect the argument structure.

**Non-Core Arguments**

Now that I had established the flexibility of Kabyle word order amongst core arguments, I wanted to try a construction with more than two arguments.

(7) a. i-ðʰɛgrɔ ILYES θækuɾt i IMENE

M.3SG-throw ILYES.M ball to IMENE

“Ilyes throws Imene a ball”

- b. ILYES i-ð<sup>ʕ</sup>εgrΛ θækurt i IMENE  
 ILYES.M M.3SG-throw ball to IMENE  
 “Ilyes throws Imene a ball”
- c. \*i-ð<sup>ʕ</sup>εgrΛ ILYES i IMENE θækurt  
 M.3SG-throw ILYES.M to IMENE ball  
 “Ilyes throws Imene a ball”

In each construction in (7), the dative argument “Imene” follows the core arguments “Ilyes” and “ball.” The consultant was adamant that the dative shift in (7c) does not work. This further confirms that the subject is the only argument that can be scrambled in Kabyle.

## Conclusion

In summation, Kabyle appears to permit subject scrambling, likely as a way to mark the importance or unimportance of the subject during a conversation. As well, this movement does not trigger any case marking and does not extend to arguments other than the subject.

This is an interesting case against the notion that all languages must have one dominant word order (or else, be completely free). Kabyle, unlike English, French, Mandarin and many other languages with a dominant order, permits exactly three: SVO, VSO and VOS. According to the World Atlas of Language Structures (WALS), Syrian Arabic — a cousin of Kabyle genetically — also permits SVO and VSO (Dryer, 2013). Yet, that same WALS chapter has Kabyle itself listed as a VSO-dominant language, in direct opposition to the data attested in this paper. When I showed my consultant this information, she commented that she suspects VSO may indeed be slightly more common, but reiterated that she found it to be equally grammatical and optional to SVO.

Word order in any language is somewhat malleable. While English speakers only use SVO in “all-new” contexts, sentences can still be reworked to highlight certain information, (consider: “It was bread that Jordan ate”). So, the pragmatic context of each word order in Kabyle is key to understanding it. This aspect is limited by the fact that I could only come as close as to simulate basic questions and answers during my research. In the future, I would like to collect a large body of data to determine in what ways Kabyle speakers naturally construct sentences.



### Appendix of Additional Examples

(10) *Transitive Clause with Adjunct*

- a. IMENE θ-su εmɛn ikuðɪs  
 IMENE.F F.3SG-drink water with.him  
 “Imene drinks water with him.”
- b. θ-su IMENE εmɛn ikuðɪs  
 F.3SG-drink IMENE.F water with.him  
 “Imene drinks water with him.”

(11) *Ditransitive Clause*

- a. ILYES i-ʃɛgɛ msəmmɛn i IMENE  
 ILYES.M M.3SG-send flatbread to IMENE  
 “Ilyes sends Imene flatbread”
- b. i-ʃɛgɛ ILYES msəmmɛn i IMENE  
 M.3SG-send ILYES.M flatbread to IMENE  
 “Ilyes sends Imene flatbread”

(12) *Matrix Clause*

- a. mið θ-εχðɪm jɪm-ɛs ɛksum [ji-tʃ ILYES ɛksum]  
 because F.3SG-make mother.his meat M.3SG-eat ILYES.M meat  
 “Ilyes eats meat because his mother makes meat”
- b. mið jɪmɛs θ-εχðɪm ɛksum [ji-tʃ ILYES ɛksum]  
 because mother.his F.3SG-make meat M.3SG-eat ILYES.M meat  
 “Ilyes eats meat because his mother makes meat”

(13) *Subordinate Clause*

- a. mi ILYES ji-tʃ ɛksu[m] [IMENE θ-su ɛmɛn]  
 when ILYES.M M.SG-eat meat IMENE F.SG-drink water  
 “When Ilyes eats meat, Imene drinks water”
- b. mi ILYES ji-tʃ ɛksu[m] [θ-su IMENE ɛmɛn]  
 when ILYES.M M.SG-eat meat F.SG-drink IMENE.F water  
 “When Ilyes eats meat, Imene drinks water”

(14) *Response to “Does Imene eat bread?”*

- a. χatʰej tsi-tʃ-ɛra IMENE æʁu[m]  
 no F.3SG-eat-NEG IMENE.F bread  
 “No, Imene does not eat bread”
- b. χatʰej IMENE tsi-tʃ-ɛra æʁu[m]  
 no IMENE.F F.3SG-eat-NEG bread  
 “No, Imene does not eat bread”
- c. χatʰej ts-ɪtʃ-ɛra æʁu[m] IMENE  
 no F.3SG-eat-NEG bread IMENE.F  
 “No, Imene does not eat bread”

## References

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