

## Order of Subject, Object and Verb

## (Dryer 2013 in WALS)

This survey considers 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 table.

Value	<i>f</i>
Subject-object-verb (SOV)	565
Subject-verb-object (SVO)	488
Verb-subject-object (VSO)	95
Verb-object-subject (VOS)	25
Object-verb-subject (OVS)	11
Object-subject-verb (OSV)	4
Lacking a dominant order	189
Total:	1377

Some languages can be assigned straightforwardly to one of the six types, because all orders other than one are either ungrammatical or infrequent. Such languages have **rigid order**. In many other languages all six orders are grammatical. Such languages can be said to have **flexible 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 dominant 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”.

Another 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, the dominant order is SVO in main clauses lacking an auxiliary and SOV in subordinate clauses and clauses containing an auxiliary. 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.

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.

The **problem** however remains: there are many instances in which it is difficult to classify a language according to the six-way typology of SOV, SVO, VSO, VOS, OVS, and OSV. These problems arise, either because of difficulties deciding what if anything is subject or object, or, more commonly, because the flexibility of the language is sufficiently great that it is difficult to say that a single one of these orders is basic.

In many cases, however, such languages are more easily classifiable as SV or VS, or as OV or VO. One of the reasons for this is that transitive clauses containing a noun subject and a noun object do not occur very often in most languages, but clauses with just a noun subject or just a noun object are much more common. In many languages with flexible word order, frequency criteria will point to a classification of the language as, say SV and OV, in that subjects and objects more often precede the verb, but frequency criteria will leave the classification of the language as SOV or OVS more questionable.

## Group A

### 1. OV (object verb) vs. VO (verb object) order

Descriptions of clause order in grammars of various languages and in typological research often dwell too long on the problem of classifying the language as SOV or SVO, etc., and less frequently address questions of whether the language is OV or VO, even though the latter sort of question is often answered more easily. Let's try to operationalize this variable.

a) What possible values can this variable take?

Fill out the table with possible values and respective frequencies on the basis of the number in the feature-value table on the previous page. The total should be identical in both table. The number of types will be different from the table above).

Value	<i>f</i>
Total:	1377

b) Parallel to the exemplar-based survey method used to determine the locus of possessive markers, specify the kind of contexts which can be considered in the survey in case there is a variation in the order? E.g. in cases when declarative clauses are different from interrogative clauses, or when clauses with pronominal objects have a different order than with nominal objects.

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c) What kind of scale (nominal, rank, interval or ratio) are we dealing with?

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d) Sketch a plot to represent the distribution in your table.

e) Which order (OV vs. VO) seems to be universally preferred on the basis of this sample?

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## Head-initial vs. head final languages

Primus, Beatrice (2001): Word Order Typology. In: Haspelmath, M. / König, E. (Hrsg.) (2001): *Sprachtypologie und sprachliche Universalien. Ein internationales Handbuch*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 855-874. (= HSK, 20.2)

One of the central activities in linguistic typology is the investigation of relationship between different typological features. In the domain of word order Greenberg (1963) contributed immensely to the understanding of the relationship between different word-order-related variables. Greenberg's major contribution was the insight that the basic order of the major constituents of the clause (subject, object, and verb) correlates with the basic order of minor elements relative to each other, such as noun and genitive, noun and adjective, adposition and noun.

Later a principle underlying these correlations was formulated in terms of the distinction 'head' vs. 'dependents', as in (1):

**(1) Consistent Head Serialization (CHS):**

For all phrasal categories X, the head of X either precedes or follows all dependents.

The principle leads to a typological distinction in terms of ideally consistent head-final vs. head-initial word order, and as a consequence, to a distinction between head-initial and head-final languages. Table 1 summarizes the basic facts (head are given in bold).

**An example**

Fijian (Austronesian) is an example of head-initial languages. The verb precedes the object:

*e=rai-ca a gone a qase*  
 3sg=see-TR DEF child DEF old.person  
 'the old person saw the child'.

The language employs prepositions (Pr) rather than postpositions:

*mai Wairi'i*  
 from Wairi'i  
 'from Wairi'i'

The genitive follows the possessed noun:

*a liga-i Jone*  
 DEF hand-POSS John  
 'John's hand'

Not all languages adhere to the CHS principle and one finds combinations of head-initial and head-final orders. An important questions is which combinations are possible and which are impossible in the languages of the world.

Phrase	Consistent head-initial order	Consistent head-final order
<b>VP (verb phrase)</b>	<b>verb</b> – object (VO)	object – <b>verb</b> (OV)
<b>PP (adpositional phrase)</b>	<b>preposition</b> – noun (Pr)	noun – <b>postposition</b> (Po)
<b>DP (determiner phrase)</b>	<b>article</b> – noun	noun – <b>article</b>
<b>NP (noun phrase)</b>	<b>noun</b> – genitive/possessor (NG)	genitive/possessor – <b>noun</b> (GN)
<b>NP (noun phrase)</b>	<b>noun</b> – adjective (NA)	adjective – <b>noun</b> (AN)
<b>NP (noun phrase)</b>	<b>noun</b> – numeral (NNum)	numeral – <b>noun</b> (NumN)
<b>NP (noun phrase)</b>	<b>noun</b> – demonstrative (NDem)	demonstrative – <b>noun</b> (DemN)
<b>NP (noun phrase)</b>	<b>noun</b> – relative clause (NRel)	relative clause – <b>noun</b> (RelN)

## Group B

### 1. Head-final vs. head-initial languages

You are given a small sample of 14 languages (the table to the right).

Sketch below a typological pilot study: How can one **verify** the Principle of Consistent Head Serialization on the basis of this sample?

You do not have to use all data points, two or three variables are sufficient.

Language	OV/VO	Pre- or postposition	Adjective & Noun	Numeral & Noun
Aari	OV	Postpositions	NAdj	NNum
Abau	OV	Postpositions	NAdj	NNum
Abkhaz	OV	Postpositions	NAdj	No dominant
Abun	VO	Prepositions	NAdj	NNum
Achang	OV	Postpositions	Other	NNum
Acholi	VO	Prepositions	NAdj	NNum
Adang	OV	Postpositions	NAdj	NNum
Adioukrou	VO	Postpositions	NAdj	NNum
Agta	VO	Prepositions	AdjN	NumN
Ainu	OV	Postpositions	AdjN	NumN
Alamblak	OV	Postpositions	AdjN	NumN
Amis	VO	Prepositions	AdjN	NumN
Atayal	VO	Prepositions	No dominant	NumN
Avar	OV	Postpositions	AdjN	NumN