

Linguistics 203 – Languages of the World
Syntax (Word Order)

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 shōudǎo-le yī-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-ahosi-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)

amad kalapéé hap#h
jaguar child see.IND
O S V
'The child sees the jaguar.'

● 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

Ignoring languages of type (7), we see the following statistics (based on a total of 1228-172 = 1052 languages):

1. SOV	47.1%
2. SVO	41.2%
3. VSO	8%
4. VOS	2.5%
5. OVS	.9%
6. OSV	.4%

Order	Representative Languages
1. SOV	Japanese, Korean, Hindi, Latin, Basque
2. SVO	English, Romance languages, Mandarin, Swahili
3. VSO	Irish, Arabic, Welsh, Hawaiian, Tagalog
4. VOS	Malagasy, Nias, Toba Batak, Tzotzil
5. OVS	Hixkaryana
6. OSV	Nadëb

Source for examples and counts:

Dryer, Matthew S.. 2008. "Order of Subject, Object and Verb."

In: Haspelmath, Martin & Dryer, Matthew S. & Gil, David & Comrie, Bernard (eds.) *The World Atlas of Language Structures Online*. Munich: Max Planck Digital Library, chapter 81. Available online at <http://wals.info/feature/81> Accessed on 2010-03-07. Images taken from .pdf version available at <http://linguistics.buffalo.edu/people/faculty/dryer/dryer/DryerWalsSOVNoMap.pdf>

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Below are some of Greenberg's 'universals' which are related to word order.

Universal 3. Languages with dominant VSO order are always prepositional.

Universal 4. With overwhelmingly greater than chance frequency, languages with normal SOV order are postpositional.

Universal 5. If a language has dominant SOV order and the genitive follows the governing noun, then the adjective likewise follows the noun.

Universal 6. All languages with dominant VSO order have SVO as an alternative or as the only alternative basic order.

Universal 12. If a language has dominant order VSO in declarative sentences, it always puts interrogative words or phrases first in interrogative word questions; if it has dominant order SOV in declarative sentences, there is never such an invariant rule.

Universal 16. In languages with dominant order VSO, an inflected auxiliary always precedes the main verb. In languages with dominant order SOV, an inflected auxiliary always follows the main verb.

Universal 17. With overwhelmingly more than chance frequency, languages with dominant order VSO have the adjective after the noun.

Source:

Joseph H. Greenberg, "Some Universals of Grammar with Particular Reference to the Order of Meaningful Elements", In: Joseph H. Greenberg (ed.). *Universals of Language*. London: MIT Press, pp. 110-113

Another classification: 'Head-initial' vs 'Head-final' languages

	Type of Phrase	Head-initial languages		Head-final languages	
		Head	Non-head	Non-head	Head
a.	VP	V _i	(object) NP	(object) NP	V _i
b.	VP	AUX	VP	VP	AUX
c.	PP	P	NP	NP	P
d.	NP	NP	relative clause	relative clause	NP
e.	NP	N	possessive NP	possessive NP	N
f.	NP	N	AdjP	AdjP	N

French (head-initial)

- | | | | |
|----|---|----|--|
| a. | Jean mange une pomme.
Jean eats an apple
'Jean eats an apple' | b. | Jean peut parler anglais.
Jean can speak English
'Jean can speak English.' |
| c. | avec un baton
with a stick
'with a stick' | d. | le garçon qui a parlé ...
the boy who has spoken
'the boy who spoke...' |
| e. | la soeur de Jean
the sister of Jean
'John's sister' | f. | une fleur blanche
a flower white
'a white flower' |

Hindi (head-final)

- | | | | |
|----|---|----|---|
| a. | [ram-ne seb k ^h a:ja]
Ram-NE apple ate
'Ram ate an apple.' | b. | [ram angrezi bol səkta hɛ]
Ram English speak able is
'Ram can speak English.' |
| c. | [tʃari-se]
stick-with
'with a stick' | d. | [dʒis larke-ne kutte-ko ma:ra]
which boy-NE dog-KO hit
'the boy who hit the dog...' |
| e. | [ram-ki bahin]
Ram-POSS sister
'Ram's sister' | f. | [safed p ^h ul]
white flower
'white flower' |

Source:

Bergmann, A., K. Hall, & S. Ross (Eds.). *Language Files 10: Materials for an Introduction to Language and Linguistics*. Columbus, OK: The Ohio State University Press.