

A comparison on orders of S, O, V and R, T, V

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The result of a survey about the orders of R(ecipient), T(heme) and V(erb) reveals some interesting similarities and differences to that of S, O and V. The survey was based on 90 languages in China. The basic data are as follows:

Orders of S, O, V (Dryer 2005):		SOV	SVO	VSO	VOS	OVS	OSV
	497	435	85	26	9	4	
Our data of R, T and V:		RTV	RVT	VRT	VTR	TVR	TRV
	35	3	19	6	0	0	

If we classify the two sets into three groups with V as the reference point, the similarities and differences becomes clearer as follows.

V-initial		V-final		V-middle		Lacking a basic order
VRT	VTR	RTV	TRV	RVT	TVR	
19	6	35	3	0	0	27

Table 1 (Lu & Luo 2007)

V-initial		V-final		V-middle		lacking a basic order
VSO	VOS	SOV	OSV	SVO	OVS	
85	26	497	4	435	9	172

Table 2 (Dryer 2005)

A sketchy overview indicates that the word order behavior of R and T are similar to that of S and O respectively in V-final and –initial cases. As for verb-middle cases, R, T and S, O are very different in word order behavior. In the following, we will try to explain the similarities and differences of the two sets.

The two major factors involved here are **Linear Precedence (LP)**, being temporal in nature, and **Semantic Proximity (SP)**, being spatial in nature.

LP claims that there is a hierarchy of precedence tendency among constituents. The hierarchy is motivated by several factors, including definiteness, animacy, given-new information, etc. They could constitute a natural class ‘identifiability’. LP expects that the more identifiable the referent of a constituent is (in NPs, the more identifiability a modifier contributes to its mother), the stronger is its tendency to precede. Specifically relevant here, in most cases, S and R, frequently being higher in animacy and definiteness, appear earlier than O and T respectively.

SP claims that there is a hierarchy of proximity to the verb among dependent constituents. Specifically relevant here, O and T are closer to V than S and R respectively.

Now, let us first explain the similarity of the two V-initial sets in Tables 1 and 2.

(1) V-initial ordering

Data comparison:

Both VSO and VOS are likely to occur. In fact, numerous languages belong to the mixed type of the two orders and should be just titled with a covering term ‘V-initial languages’. Similarly, both VRT and VTR are frequently documented and in many languages it is hard to choose a basic order between the two. 13 SVO languages in our data belong to the mixed type of VRT and VTR. The ration of VRT: VTR is $19/6=3.17$, very close to that of VSO:VOS, i.e. $85/26=3.27$.

Explanation:

VSO/VRT satisfy LP but violate SP while VOS/VTR satisfy SP but violate LP. Thus both are likely to occur.

In addition, we may assume that the power of LP is 3 times strong as that of SP, thus the ratio about 3 of VSO/VRT over VOS/VTR.

(2) V-final ordering

Data comparison:

SOV is overwhelmingly dominant over OSV. The ratio SOV: OSV is $497/4=124.25$. Similarly, RTV is overwhelmingly dominant over TRV. The corresponding ratio is $35/3=11.67$. Both ratios are over 10. However, the ratio of SOV: OSV is about 10 times of that of RTV: TRV.

Explanation:

The overwhelming dominance of SOV/RTV over OSV/TRV can be explained with the reinforcement of LP and SP: LP favors the orders [S...O] and [R...T]. SP favors the orders where O and T are closer to V than S and R are, i.e. {{{V}O}S} and {{{V}T}R} (where { } means proximity, not linear order). Since SOV/RTV satisfy both LP and SP, but OSV/TRV violate both LP and SP. Thus SOV/RTV are overwhelmingly dominant over OSV/TRV.

Furthermore, since S is the default topic (best candidate for topic), or in other words, it serves the function of topic here, but R is not, the difference between S and O in terms of precedence tendency is enlarged, hence the difference of the two ratios 124.25 and 11.67 .

(3) V-middle

Data comparison:

The two sets of V-middle orders differ obviously. SVO is overwhelmingly dominant over OVS. However, as basic word orders, neither RVT nor TVR language is documented in our data. Nevertheless, there is still a minor similarity between the two sets: In many VRT/VTR languages and few RTV/TRV languages, the RVT alternation is much more frequently used than the TVR, such as Bai and Bisu.

Explanation:

If we follow the vein of the explanations of V-final and -initial sets, we just cannot explain the difference between SVO:OVS and RVT:TVR. One may be tempted to say that SVO satisfies both LP and SP, based on the structure [S[VO]], while OVS satisfies SP in the assigned structure [[OV]S] but violates LP. However, this difference shouldn't result in such big difference of the numbers of SVO and OVS languages. Consider the difference between VOS (26 lgs) and OVS (9 lgs). Both satisfy SP but violate LP, but the difference in numbers of tested languages of each order is considerable. There must be some other factors coming into play. A likely one is the surface order. Though it might be possible to assign the structure [[OV]S] to OVS, superficially, O and S really have equal proximity to V. Thus, the claim that OVS satisfies SP is dubious. Hence, OVS just violates LP and is irrelevant to SP. Or in other words, the role of SP can be seen as neutral here. This explains the difference of VOS and OVS with respect to the numbers of tested languages.

If OVS does not satisfy SP, then, how about SVO? Superficially, S and O are also equally close to V. However, consider the following contrast between VO and OV orders with regard to X (oblique and adverbial), it is obvious that the combination of VO is much more compacted than that of OV, because X cannot insert into VO order, but can into OV.

VO order			OV order			more than one order with none dominant
VOX	XVO	VXO	XOV	OXV	OVX	
189	3	0	45	23	37	152

Table 3 (Dryer & Gensle 2005)

Therefore, OV is not a very compacted combination, but VO is. And hence [[OV]S] does not make much sense. In other words, the claim that OVS, being assigned with [[OV]S], satisfies SP is not solid enough. Therefore, SVO satisfy both LP and SP while OVS violates LP and is irrelevant to SP. This difference in structure results in the numbers of tested languages.

Now, we are in the position to explain why both V-middle RVT and TVR cannot be the basic order. It seems that there is a strong universal tendency to put R and T on the same side of V. This assumption is supported by Table 3, given that one of R and T aligns with oblique. In Table 3, there are 257 languages having O and X on the same side of V, only 40 languages have O and X on the two sides of V.

The above analysis does not apply to the difference between SVO and OVS, due to the high topicality of S in the initial position. The relation S and O is that of topic and part of predicate, while the relation of R and T is that of object and oblique, belong to the same category to a much greater extent than S and O.

To sum up, in terms of word order, when V-initial, S/R vs. O/T behave extremely similar; When V-final, S/R vs. O/T behave basically the same. The minor difference can be attributed to the high topicality of S; When V-middle, S/R vs. O/T are basically different. The major differences can be attribute to the high topicality of S and the difference of compactness between VO and OV.

Two puzzles are waiting for explanation. 1: Why VO is more compacted than OV. 2: How come the considerable difference between 3 XVO languages and 37 OVX languages in Table 3. Space limited, we will leave them for the future discussion.

Appendix: Ordering of R, T and V in 90 languages in China:

RTV (35)	Qiang, Dongxiang, East Yugur, Daur, Primi, Kachin, Achang, Uyghur, Lisu, Hani, Jino, Lahu, Nasu, Kirgiz, Evenki, Uzbek, Bengni-Bogar, Drung, Langsu, Cangluo Monba; Daofu, Queyu, Lvsu, Nung; Cuona Monba; Motuo Monba; Lhoba, Darang Deng, Geman Deng; Rouruo, Anong, Bisu [SOV, 32] [RTV/trv] Tibetan, Tuchia, Sibo [SOV, 3]	RTV/TVR (9) Zaiwa, Naxi, Salar, Tatar, West Yugur, Kazakh, Yidu, Zhaba, Muya
TRV (3)	Yi, Tuva, Gazhuo [SOV, 3]	
VRT (19)	Blang, Pouyei, Benglong, Hmong, Bunu, Kelao, Dong, Baheng, Buxing, Yanghuang, Bai [SVO, 11] Amis, Bunun, Paiwan [VSO, 3] [VRT/vtr] Jing, Li, Mulam, She, Lingao [SVO, 5] [RTV/vrt/rvt] Bisu	VRT/VTR (3) Biao, Bugeng, Cun [3]
VTR (6)	Laka, Dai [SVO, 2] [VTR/vrt] Sui, Mian; Huihui, Jiongnai [SVO, 4]	

RVT (0)	Bai (VRT/rvt), Bisu (RTV/vrt/rvt)	
TVR (0)		
Unknown/ Unclear (15)	Nanai (Hezhen), Mongolian, Bao'an, Tu, Tadjik, Korean, Olunchun, Namuz, Shixing, Leqi, Pola, Xiandao [SOV, 12] Va, Zhuang, Mulao [SVO, 3]	