

SVO and OVS – really a case of competing motivations? Evidence from German Child Language

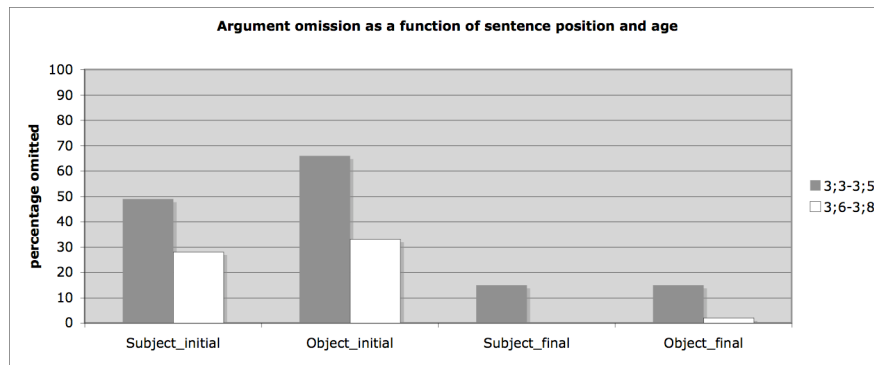
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In German, the most frequent and pragmatically neutral – i.e., *unmarked* – word order is SVO. Word orders that deviate from this pattern are generally considered *marked*: they fulfil different functions. With regard to SVO, Du Bois' (1987) account of Preferred Argument Structure captures the cross-linguistically valid statistical tendency of subjects of SVO transitives to tend to contain known or recurring information and of objects to reference new information. Information structurally, this phenomenon is described in a similar way: prototypical SVO transitives are predicate-focus constructions (Lambrecht, 1996) with a topical (i.e., *given*) subject and a focal (i.e., *new*) object. Since subjects represent given information, they are referred to with pronouns – or can in fact be dropped entirely, as is the case in so-called pro-drop languages (Chomsky, 1981). This information structural distribution leads to a general unevenness in the omission of referents: subjects are omitted more often than objects. This subject-object asymmetry is not only well attested in adult language use, but is also a pervasive phenomenon in child language – in both pro-drop and non pro-drop languages. However, given that in these transitive constructions subjects are topical and objects are focal, and thus exhibit different information structural properties, an *in situ* SVO comparison presents a far from ideal test case for the subject-object asymmetry.

Word order in German is more variable than in English and allows for both SVO and OVS constructions so that either S or O can assume topic status. Null references for both subjects and objects in utterance initial position are felicitous in adult spoken German. We assessed the relation between word order and argument omission with an elicited production study. German-speaking children of two age groups ([1] M=3;4, [2] M=3;8) completed a sticker book for a 3rd person referent (an elephant). Some stickers in the book were missing while some were already in place. The experimenter drew a sticker and then asked the child to check the elephant's book. She used a model utterance in order to elicit a response, either in SVO (*Der hat den oder der will den*. "He's got it or he needs it.") or in OVS (*Den will der oder den hat der*. "This one he's needs or this one he's got."). The results indicate that both age groups omit both subject and object referents according to their position in the sentence: Initial arguments are omitted significantly more often than final arguments (see [Figure 1](#)). Whereas the older children omit initial subjects and objects alike, younger children omit initial objects more often than subjects. Thus, when information structure is taken into account, the subject-object asymmetry is neutralised and arguments are omitted due to sentence position and information status. The marked word order OVS behaves just like the unmarked SVO word order; thus, with regard to information structure, these different word orders do not compete, but rather, they converge on a similar function: [topic – action – secondary topic/focus]. We speculate that two different functions compete for both SVO *and* OVS word orders in German. Initial objects in German OVS sentences cannot only assume topic-hood, they can also serve to introduce new information (*foci*). Subjects serve the same function: [focus – action – topic]. Thus, information structural factors might be the real determinants of the patterns of use for these two different word orders in German.

Figure 1.



References.

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- (2) DuBois, J.W (1987). The discourse basis of ergativity. Language 63(4): 805-855.
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