

4. Grammar and Syntax

Summary

Sentences are constructed from concept words, which refer to a person, thing, action, or state, and grammatical words, which support concept words to convey their meaning. Concept words may combine with grammatical words to form inflections. The grammar of each language consists of rules for grammatical words and rules of word order.

The function of each concept word in a sentence determines the grammatical words and rules of word order that it requires to convey its meaning. These grammatical rules and rules of word order are the syntax of the concept word.

An auxiliary word is a grammatical word which substitutes for a concept word, either a verb, noun, or attribute. It either replaces a concept word, or is attached to a concept word in order to extend its function in the sentence. A pronoun is an auxiliary noun.

An article is a grammatical word which expresses the identity of an attached noun.

A link is a grammatical word which connects a noun to another word (called a “head word”) to realise the syntax of the head word.

A converse link is a grammatical word which connects a noun to a head word to realise the syntax of the connected word. A converse link and its noun together express a state or condition. Together with adjectives, such expressions are called “attributes”, and a converse link is an auxiliary attribute.

Both links and converse links generally occur either before the noun (preposition) or after the noun (postposition), according to the rules of the language. They are often the same words and follow the same grammatical rules as locatives (Chapter 6., The Locative Function), while having a different meaning.

A relative clause is a sentence which qualifies a noun. In principle, it can take any acceptable sentence construction, and can be linked in any way to the qualified noun. It has to be distinguished from a sentence as predicate. In left-branching languages, this arises because the relative clause precedes the noun, while the predicate follows it. In right-branching languages, a relative pronoun within the relative clause may link it to the qualified noun.

Rules of word order differ between languages, but are consistent within each language since comprehension depends on their consistent use. Languages are divided between those in which the verb precedes the object (VO), and those in which the object precedes the verb (OV). Although there is some consistency between right-branching languages and VO and between left-branching languages and OV, it is suggested that these rules arise from different causes. The VO/OV distinction is due to different conventions for focussing on the object.

Rules of word order are also needed to distinguish between the object and verb of an existential sentence, and (where focus is not marked by a particle) to identify an element in focus.

Languages can also be divided between those in which, in an unstressed sentence, the verb precedes the subject (VS), and those in which the subject precedes the verb (SV). However, if a sentence in a VS language contains an element in focus, it generally appears in front of the verb. This suggests that VS languages are by their nature existential, and can be contrasted with SV languages which are by their nature topic-comment.

Terms Defined or Introduced

Grammar, syntax, concept word, auxiliary word, inflection, pronoun, link, converse link, attribute, locative, directive, relative clause, relative pronoun, VO, OV, SV, VS.

Grammar and Syntax

In previous chapters, we have discussed how the unit of meaning of a language is a sentence, and how the meaning of a sentence requires it to be placed within a discourse. A sentence consists of a subject, verb, object, and other elements. Unless it is an existential sentence, it is linked to a previous sentence or sentences by a topic, the remainder being a comment, focus, enquiry, or hypothesis. These elements are built up of words, comprising nouns, verbs, and attributes, which each possess an identity. An identity of a noun, verb, or attribute may be determined, altered, or enhanced by its qualification. In Chapter 5., we shall also note how the relation of one sentence to another in discourse also requires an understanding of its aspect.

The meaning of a sentence therefore requires an understanding of the purpose of each word in it. This is expressed by one of two ways: by an attached marking word, or by a convention of word order in a sentence. These naturally vary between languages. For each language, the marking words and word order conventions are its *grammar*.

If we first consider marking words, examples which we have already come across are “the”, “some”, “not”, “est-ce que”, and “would”. The words of a language therefore divide into two:

- *Concept words*, which express an idea (a person, thing, action, or state) in the world that the language is describing.
- Marking words, which we call *grammatical words*. These do not express a concept but support concept words to convey their meaning in the sentence.

In most languages, grammatical words can combine with concept words, in a process called *inflection*. Examples in English are a plural “train/trains”, present participle “come/coming”, and past participle “write/wrote”. In a few languages, such as Chinese, there is no inflection; these are called *isolating languages*. In the course of this analysis of language, we shall come across six principal sorts of grammatical word: auxiliary words, articles, links, relative pronouns, selection markers, and conjunctions. The first four of these are described in more detail below. Conjunctions are the subject of Chapter 5. Selection markers are expressions such as “rather than”, “not”, or “more than”, which are discussed in Chapters 13. and 14.

In addition, the grammar of each language possesses rules of word order which assign to a concept word its purpose in the discourse structure of the sentence, so that it is immediately recognisable: subject, verb, object, attribute, topic, comment, focus, or enquiry. There is no agreed model for doing this, so that different languages may have markedly different word orders. These different conventions are also discussed below.

In Chapters 6. to 12., we shall describe how sentences express the action or state of a sentence, and that this purpose of a sentence is distinct from its purpose in discourse. The action or state of a sentence is called its function. For example, the following four sentence express respectively the functions of movement, role, constituent, and ownership:

“William climbed up the tree”; “James was elected Chairman of the Society”;
“My car has a new catalytic converter”; “Sheila has inherited an estate in Scotland”.

We shall discuss in all 37 functions. For each of them, additional elements or words are needed to make the function meaningful. “William climbed”; “James was elected”; “My car has a new”; “Sheila has inherited” are not useful sentences without additional information. We call that information the *syntax* of the function. We can equally use syntax to describe the elements needed to construct a function word as a qualifier: “the tree William climbed”; “the Society of which James is Chairman”; “my car’s catalytic converter”; “Sheila’s estate in Scotland”.

This use of *syntax* is different from that conventionally employed, where it usually just means the rules of word order. It is, however, a useful term in the functional analysis of language. We can of course also refer to the syntax of the discourse elements of a sentence, but these are much simpler than those of functional elements, since a sentence generally only has one discourse element of each type. As the above examples illustrate, syntax is expressed by grammatical words and rules of word order.

Auxiliary Words

An *auxiliary word* is a grammatical word which substitutes for a concept word. By combining with a concept word, it can create a different concept word of related meaning. Auxiliary words arise because no language possesses a full range of concept words for all the possible functions of each concept. Languages therefore use them to extend their vocabulary.

Additionally, an auxiliary word can represent a concept word so that it is not necessary to repeat it.

Auxiliary words can substitute for verbs, attributes, or nouns.

- An *auxiliary verb* supports the action or state of a subject. The action or state is conveyed by an associated concept noun or attribute. English examples of auxiliary verbs are “is”, “becomes”, “falls”, “gets”, “has”, “does”, “makes”, “gives”, “puts”, or “receives”. Equivalents occur in many languages:

English: “They fell in love.” “We put them to flight.” “She got very cold.”

Irish: “Táid ag baint fhéir.” “They are [at] mowing [of] hay.”

Turkish: “Bu iki eseri mukayese ediyör.” “He is comparing these two works.”
[These two works _(object) comparison he-is-making.]
“Öksürük oldu.” “He’s caught a cough.” [Cough he-became.]

Hindi: “maĩ nau baje darvāzā band kartā hū” “I close the door at nine o’clock.”
[I nine o’clock door closed making am.]
“laṛke ne pūrā pannā paṛh diyā” “The boy read out the entire page.”
[Boy-by entire page reading gave.]

Japanese:
“Watashi wa chūkoguko o benkyō shite iru.” “I am studying Chinese.”
[I _(topic) Chinese _(object) study doing there-is.]
“Yamada wa teigaku ni natta.” “Yamada got suspended from school.”
[Yamada _(topic) suspension-in became.]

An auxiliary verb is also used to relate the action or state of a verb to its subject and/or to the rest of the narrative or dialogue, in which case the concept is conveyed by an attached verb. The different purposes illustrated below are each discussed in the relevant chapter of this functional grammar. The auxiliary verb is in brackets:

discourse:	“He would come if he could.” “She did arrive after lunch.” “They did not answer the question.”	(would) (did) (did not)
modality:	“She can speak Finnish.” “We must arrive on time.”	(can) (must)
aspect/tense/viewpoint	“They were preparing to go out.” “We have eaten lunch.” “She will have gone out.”	(were) (have) (will have)
causation:	“The noise made us jump.”	(made)
inchoation:	“The printer started to print.” “They went on walking.” “We stopped talking.”	(started) (went on) (stopped)
manner (Arabic):	“la-qad ʔasaʔta fahmī” “You have misunderstood me.”	“ʔasaʔa” (“do badly”)

[You-have-erred understanding-my.]	
“ʔajzala lahu l-ʔaʔāʔa”	“ʔajzala”
“He gave generously to him.”	(“do generously”)
[He-did-generously for-him the-giving.]	

The functions of these auxiliary verbs may also be performed by verb inflections, or by words attached to verbs (“particles”):

Russian: “Byl li on v teatre?” “Was he at the theatre?” [Was query he at theatre?]

Chinese: “Wǒ zài yínháng kāi le yī gè zhànhù.” “I have opened an account at the bank.”
[I at bank open (aorist) one unit account.]

- An *auxiliary attribute* supports the qualification of a noun. The qualification is conveyed by an associated concept noun or verb. English examples are the first words in the following expressions:

“in progress”; “at rest”; “in motion”; “in line”; “at ease”; “at risk”.

These expressions have the same functions as adjectives, although some may only be used in predicates:

“The work is in progress”; “The work in progress is being reported”; “The train is in motion”; “We are at ease”; “The persons at risk should be warned”.

In order to cover the functions of both adjectives and expressions of the above form which are equivalent to adjectives, we use the term *attribute*. The words “in”, “at”, etc which create an attribute from a noun are therefore an *auxiliary attribute*.

- A *pronoun* expresses a noun which has been previously identified. English examples are “he”, “she”, or “that”. They avoid the need to re-state the noun, and occur in all languages. They may be qualified by a restrictive qualifier. Their use is discussed in Chapter 2. (Pronoun).

In many languages, pronouns which are the subject and/or object of the verb combine with verbs:

Italian: “Ce li trovarai.” “You’ll find them there.” [There them find-will-you.]

Swahili: “Umekileta kitabu?” “Have you brought the book?” [You-have-it-bring book?]

In some languages, pronouns also combine with nouns or locatives. Such languages are traditionally termed “agglutinative”:

Turkish: “tebrik ve teşekkürlerimi sunarım” “I offer my congratulations and thanks.”
[Congratulation and thanks-my (accusative) offer-I.]

Hungarian:

“a ház előtt” “in front of the house” [the house in-front-of]
“előttem” “in front of me” [in-front-of-me]
“a füzetemből” “out of my notebook” [the notebook-my-from]

Articles

Articles express the identity of an attached noun, whether definite, indefinite, generic, nonspecific, or indefinable (Chapters 2. and 3.). In grammars, they are also called “determiners”. Examples are “the”, “a”, “some”, “any”, or “no”.

Articles are usually separate words. In Romanian, they combine with the noun:

“munte”	“mountain”	“munți”	“mountains”
“muntele”	“the mountain”	“munții”	“the mountains”
“muntelui”	“of the mountain”	“munților”	“of the mountains”

Links

Where the syntax of a word is not adequately expressed by word order, languages employ a *link*. A link is a word (or an equivalent inflection) which connects two concept words, in order to realise the syntax of one of them. One of these concept words is then subject to the syntax of another concept word, or is the verb of the sentence, and is called the *head word*. The word which is not the head word is invariably a noun or pronoun, and is the *linked noun*.

In the majority of constructions, the link between the head word and the linked noun expresses the syntax of the head word. In the following examples, the head word, link, and linked noun are in brackets:

“He gave the information to her.”	(gave)	(to)	(her)
“She wrote the article for him.”	(wrote)	(for)	(him)
“The car was driven by me.”	(driven)	(by)	(me)
“the king of France”	(king)	(of)	(France)
“good at judo”	(good)	(at)	(judo)
Chinese: “bàba de lǐngdài” “father’s tie”	(“lǐngdài”)	(“de”)	(“bàba”)
[father of tie]			
“wūzi li de jiājù” “furniture in the room”	(“jiājù”)	(“de”)	(“wūzi li”)
[room in of furniture]			
Japanese:			
“Maeda-san wa kinō kuruma o katta.”	(“katta”)	(“wa”)	(“Maeda”)
“Mr Maeda bought a car yesterday.”	(“katta”)	(“o”)	(“kuruma”)
[Maeda-Mr _(topic) yesterday car _(object) bought.]			

A link often has an alternative construction based on word order alone. English examples (the version with a link word is in brackets) are “guard duty” (“duty as guard”); “people power” (“power of the people”), “garage door” (“door of the garage”).

In the less common construction, the link expresses the syntax of the linked noun: “an object at rest”, “a building at risk”, “a patient in pain”, or “a man of honour”. Such expressions generally mean “a head word subject to the state or condition of the linked noun”, and are often equivalent to an adjective: “a resting object”, “an honourable man”. We may call this construction a *converse link*. For that reason, we cover an adjective and a converse link under the general term *attribute*, meaning a word or linked noun expressing the state or condition of a noun. Contrary to the usual terminology, an attribute can be a qualifier or predicate:

“The object was at rest”; “The building was at risk”: “The patient was in pain”.

Converse links are more commonly found in adverbial expressions, as an alternative to an adverb formed from an adjective: “in haste” (“hastily”); “at leisure” (“leisurely”). Arabic, which lacks means to form adverbs, constructs many adverbial expressions in this manner: “bi-fāʿiliyyatin” (“effectively” [with effectiveness]); “bi-basāʿatin” (“simply” [with simplicity]); “bi-l-kāmili” (“completely” [with completeness]). Adverbs and converse links qualifying verbs are covered under the general term *adverbial*.

In most languages, as illustrated above, many of the words used for links are the same as those used to express a physical relationship in space or time. Words used for a physical relationship are not links, but concept words. They can be stative: “in the room”; “up the tree”; “beside the river”; “on the table”, or dynamic: “into the room”; “up the tree”; “beside the river”; “onto the table”. In order to distinguish them from a link, we can call them a *locative* for a stative physical relationship and

directive for a dynamic one. Conventionally, link words, converse links, and locatives/directives are called prepositions if they precede the noun, or postpositions if they follow the noun.

Locatives and directives differ from links in that they can be a noun, verb, attribute, or adverbial, and can be expressed without an object. They are discussed further in Chapter 6 (The Locative Function):

“The outside is painted white.” (noun)
 “Mr Smith is outside.” “Mr Smith is outside the door.” (attribute)
 “He worked outside.” (adverbial)
 “The moat surrounds the castle.” “The box contains the shoes.” (verb)

Returning now to links, they are expressed by languages in three different ways:

- (i) By a link word, as in the above examples.
- (ii) By a single-word attribute (adjective) which expresses a noun in linked form. This occurs in English, but is more common in languages which do not permit nouns to be connected without a link (the “garage door” construction). The examples give the corresponding expression linking two nouns:

English: “The royal palace.” “The palace of the Queen.”
 “Human life.” “The life of man.”
 “Canine defence league.” “League for the defence of dogs.”

The Russian examples give in brackets the noun from which the linking adjective is derived, and an alternative adjective derived from the noun which is not a link:

“neftyanaya skvazhina”	“oil well”	(neft’ = oil)	
“pochtovyi yashchik”	“post box”	(pochta = post)	(pochtovyi = postal)
“mirovoy sud’ya”	“Justice of the Peace”	(mir = peace)	(mirnyi = peaceful)
“krovnocnyi sosud”	“blood vessel”	(krov’ = blood)	(krovavyi = bloody)
“narodnaya volya”	“people’s will”	(narod = people)	

Italian examples:

“stazione ferroviaria”	“railway station”	(ferrovia = railway)
“tasso bancario”	“bank rate”	(banco = bank)
“cartello stradale”	“road sign”	(strada = road)
“partecipazione statale”	“participation by the state”	(stato = state)
“politica energetica”	“energy policy”	(energia = energy; energico = energetic)

Serbian examples:

“očev kaput”	“father’s coat”	(otac = father)
“mamina maza”	“mother’s pet”	(mama = mother)
“Marinina prijateljica”	“Marina’s friend”	

- (iii) By an inflection of the linked noun, called a *case*. English only inflects nouns and pronouns for the genitive (“of”):

“the house of our son”	“my son’s house”
“the son of us”	“our son”

Russian inflects all nouns which are not the subject of a sentence:

“kniga”	“a/the book”
“chitajte knigu”	“read the book _(object) .”
“soderzhanie moei knigi”	“the contents of my book”
	[contents my _(genitive) book _(genitive)]

“Sad polon tsvetov.”	“The garden is full of flowers” [Garden full flowers _(genitive) .]
“Deti begayut po sadu.”	“The children are running about in the garden.” [Children running in garden _(dative) .]

Relative Pronoun

As we summarised in Chapter 2. (Restrictive Qualifier), a noun or pronoun can be qualified by a sentence, called a *relative clause*. The qualified noun is linked to a verb or a noun in the relative clause, in a way which distinguishes the relative clause from a predicate. The following compare a relative clause with a predicate sentence of the same meaning:

“the report which arrived yesterday”;
“The report arrived yesterday.”

“the report which I wrote yesterday”;
“The report was written by me yesterday.”

Alternative versions of the second relative construction are: “the report I wrote yesterday” (English) and *“the report which I wrote it yesterday” (Malay/Indonesian, Arabic, and other languages).

If the qualified noun is the subject or direct object of the verb of the relative clause, no link word may be needed. In other circumstances, the verb or noun of the relative clause may be connected to the qualified noun by a link word, which is expressed through the relative pronoun. Additional linking relative pronouns may also be used, for example “whose” (“of whom”):

“the subject on which I wrote the report”/“the subject that I wrote the report on”;
“the man whose name I have assumed”;
“the train in which she was travelling”/“the train she was travelling in”;
“the man by whose actions the crisis was caused”.

An alternative construction of the last sentence, used by many languages, would be: *“the man who the actions by him caused the crisis”.

It will be seen that in principle, a relative clause can possess any acceptable sentence construction and the qualified noun can be linked to it in any way. A relative clause is a very flexible means of qualifying a noun.

There are at least four ways in which a relative clause can be distinguished from a predicate:

- (i) The relative clause has no object where an object would be expected. This might be the object of a verb or a preposition.
- (ii) A pronoun, called a *relative pronoun*, expresses the link with the relative clause and is identified with the qualified noun. Examples are “who”, “which”, and “that”.
- (iii) The verb of the relative clause is formulated as a participle (a verbal adjective):

Turkish: “üyesi bulunduğum bir cemiyet” “a society of which I am a member”
[member-its being-my a society]
“kongresi yarın başlayacak olan cemiyet”
“the society whose congress will start tomorrow”
[congress-its tomorrow about-to-start being society]
“içinden çıktığımız ev” “the house from the inside of which we emerged”
[inside-its-from emerged-having-we house].

Inuit: “pana savissaa ipissuq” “a sword whose blade is sharp”
[sword blade-its sharp-being]
“angut isirvigisara” “the man to whom I went in” [man enter-beingat-my]

“aappariit imirat sanasuq” “a couple whose son is a builder”
[couple son-their builder]

- (iv) The relative clause fails on some other way to conform to expectations of a predicate. In Tagalog, every sentence contains only one definite noun, which may be marked with “ang” (“the”). If this marker is absent, the expression is a relative clause:

“Iyon ang babaeng magluluto ng isda.” “That’s the woman who will cook some fish.”
[That the woman-who will-cook some fish.]
“Iyon ang isdang iluluto ng babae.” “That’s the fish that the woman will cook.”
[That the fish-which will-be cooked a woman.]¹

In Maori, in an unstressed sentence the verb precedes its subject. If the verb follows the subject, it is a relative clause:

“E waiata ana ngā kōtiro.” “The girls are singing.” [Are singing the girls.]
“ngā kōtiro e waiata ana” “the girls [who] are singing”
“Nā ngā kōtiro e waiata ana.” “It is the girls [who] are singing.”

No relative pronoun is used in Maori to refer to subjects or objects. The relative pronoun “ai” is used for other elements:

“Ko tēnā te wā i huihui ai ngā whanaunga katoa.”
“That was the occasion when all the relatives gathered.”
[It-was that the occasion did gather then the relatives all.]²

Use of a relative pronoun generally occurs in right-branching languages:

Italian: “la ragazza che è arrivata” “the girl who has arrived”
“la ragazza a cui scrivo” “the girl to whom I am writing”
“il pittore, i cui quadri sono famosi” “the painter whose pictures are famous”

Arabic: “jalasa l-rajulu llāḏī yataḥaddaṯu” “The man who is talking sat.”
[Sat the-man the-one he-is-talking.]

Indonesian:
“Beberapa orang yang dikirim surat belum menjawab.”
“Several of the people who were sent letters have not yet replied.”
[Several people who were-sent letter not-yet reply.]

Swahili: “Nimejibu barua iliyokuja jana.”
“I have answered the letter which came yesterday.”
[I-have-it-answered letter it-did-which-come yesterday.]
“vitu alivyokuja navyo” “the things which he came with”
[things he-did-which-come with-which]

Chapter 2. (Pronoun) also gives examples of a definite and indefinite pronoun qualified by a relative clause. The above remarks are also true of that construction:

“what John is reading”/“what I wrote the report on”
“something which is not right”/“someone for whom I work”.

In some right-branching languages, the relative pronoun does not take a link word. The link word is included in the relative clause. This construction is also illustrated in the asterisked English example above:

Irish: “an tigh go rabhas ann” “the house in which I was” [the house that I-was in-it]

¹ Schachter, 948.

² Foster, 65, 72, 98.

Arabic: “al-muqābalatu llatī ḥaḍarahā” “the meeting which he attended”
[the-meeting the-one-which he-attended-it]
“qadrūn lā naẓīra lahu” “an amount which has no equal” [amount no equal to-it]

Persian: “mardhai ke ketabhara be anha dade budid raftand”
“The men to whom you gave the books went.”
[Men-the who books (object) to them given you-were went.]

Malay: “sopir yang namanya Ali” “the driver whose name is Ali”
[driver who name-his Ali]

In left-branching languages, the distinction from a predicate arises because the relative clause precedes the noun while the predicate follows it. Those languages may often not possess a relative pronoun. Links, if present, may be mentioned in the relative clause, or inferred:

Chinese: “géming kāishǐ de difang” “the place where the revolution started”
[revolution started-of place]
“wǒ yào mǎi tāde fāngzi de nàge nǚde” “the woman whose house I want to buy”
[I want buy her house of that woman-of]

Japanese:

“Nihongo o oshiete iru sensei wa Kobowashi-sensei desu.”
“The teacher who is teaching Japanese is Professor Kobowashi.”
[Japanese (object) teaching-is teacher (topic) Kobowashi-professor is.]

“Watashi ga nihongo o oshiete ageta Buraun-san wa yoku benkyō suru.”
“Mr Brown, to whom I taught Japanese, studies well.”
[I (subject) Japanese (object) teaching gave Brown-Mr (topic) well studies.]

Further examples are given in Chapter 2. (Restrictive Qualifier).

Word Order

If a hearer is clearly to understand a sentence and its purpose in a discourse, it must differentiate between the topic and comment, focus, enquiry, or hypothesis, and the subject, verb, and object. It must also distinguish the qualifier and predicate of a noun. These distinctions are expressed by means of particles, links, and rules of word order, and in practice languages employ all of these methods. So that the distinctions are immediately clear, the methods must be used consistently, and rules of word order in a language are therefore generally fairly rigid.

The rules of word order vary considerably between languages. There have been many detailed and thorough academic studies of these variances and of the correlations between them (see Dryer 2002, which covers 652 languages in 196 genera). The following remarks are concerned with a slightly different question, namely why these differences exist, starting with our original topic-comment analysis of sentence structure. Our examples are limited to the languages which are used as examples in this work. We examine four of the principal purpose of word order:

- (i) To distinguish between restrictive qualifiers, which identify a noun, and predicates and non-restrictive qualifiers, which supply new information about it.

The word order of restrictive qualifiers has already been mentioned in Chapter 2. A distinction can be made between those languages which locate qualifiers exclusively in front of the noun (left-branching):

Basque: “denda honetan erosi duzun liburua” “the book which you have bought in this shop”
[shop this-in buy you-have-which book];

Chinese: “xīn lái de mǐshū” “the secretary who has just come” [new come of secretary];

those which locate them exclusively after the noun (right-branching):

Welsh: “y faner ddu” “the black banner” [the banner black]

Arabic: “iḥtimālātu l-fašali l-masmūḥu bihā” “the permitted possibilities of failure”
[possibilities the-failure the-permitted to it]

Persian: “sandaliye nou” “the new chair” [chair-of new]

Indonesian:

“rumah besar” “a big house” [house big]
“orang yang sudah cape” “people who [are] already tired”;

and those which locate single-word qualifiers in front of the noun and relative clauses and longer qualifiers after the noun, such as English or Russian:

Russian: “podlinnyi document” “[the] original document”
“dom, v kotorom on zhivët” “[the] house in which he lives”

Hungarian:

“egy szép fa” “a beautiful tree”
“a könyv, amit küldtél nekem” “the book that you sent me”

Romance languages (French, Spanish, Italian, etc) place most qualifiers after the noun, but short non-restrictive qualifiers before the noun:

“une sauce piquante” “a piquant sauce”; “une belle maison” “a beautiful house”.

Some languages place restrictive qualifiers in front of the noun and non-restrictive qualifiers after it:

German: “der am Wegrand stehende Baum” [the by-the wayside standing tree]
(restrictive)
“der Baum, der am Wegrand steht” [the tree, which by-the wayside stands]
(non-restrictive)

Hindi: “jis ādmī se maĩ bāt kar rahā thā, vah kal bhārat jāegā”
“The man I was talking to is going to India tomorrow.”
[Which man-to I talking was, he tomorrow India is-going.]
(restrictive)
“maĩ ek ādmī se bāt kar rahā thā jo kal bhārat jāegā”
“I was talking to a man who is going to India tomorrow.”
[I a man-to talking was who tomorrow India is-going.]
(non-restrictive)

If we examine the qualifier itself, a distinction exists between languages which place link words, locatives, and directives in front of the noun (prepositions):

Italian:	“nel giardino”	“in the garden”
Russian:	“na stole”	“on [the] table”
Greek:	“ἀπό το φούρνο”	“out of the oven”
Welsh:	“yn y cyfarfod”	“at the meeting”
Arabic:	“taḥta l-maqʿadi”	“under the seat”
Persian:	“be otaq”	“into [the] room”
Indonesian:	“dari kota”	“from [the] city”
Chinese:	“dào fāngguǎn”	“to [a] restaurant”
Swahili:	“katika karatasi”	“on paper”;

and those which place them after the noun (postpositions) (there are a few prepositions in Finnish):

Basque:	“elizaren ondoan”	“next to the church” [church-next-to]
Finnish:	“talon eteen”	“in front of the house” [house-in-front-of]
Hungarian:	“egy órán belül”	“within an hour” [an hour-within]
Turkish:	“bu teklif için”	“about this proposal” [this proposal-about]
Hindi:	“mezõ par”	“on the tables” [tables-on]
Japanese:	“Kyōto e”	“to Kyoto” [Kyoto-to]
Inuit:	“matup tanuani”	“behind the door” [door-of behind-its-at]

The spirit behind the postpositional construction can be illustrated in English if a participle is used instead of a preposition:

“a cat-containing bag”; “a white coat-wearing lady”.

This word order is generally sustained if the same phrase is used as a predicate. In English, we can have an “in-house discussion” or “makeshift policy”; if English used postpositions, these expressions would be “*house-in discussion” and “*shift-make policy”.

In the languages we have used as examples, the correlation between the position of restrictive qualifiers and the use of prepositions or postpositions is:

Qualifiers →	Before noun	After noun	Both before and after
Prepositions	Chinese, German	Romance languages, Welsh, Irish, Arabic, Persian, Indonesian, Swahili	English, Greek, Russian
Postpositions	Basque, Turkish, Hindi, Japanese	Inuit	Finnish, Hungarian

(ii) To distinguish between a subject, verb, and object.

Languages are often classified according to the position of the verb in relation to the subject and object. The main divisions are subject-verb-object (SVO), subject-object-verb (SOV), and verb-subject-object (VSO), although some languages such as German employ more than one sequence.

French and other Romance languages are SVO, but pronoun objects are generally placed before the noun:

French: “Je prêterai les livres à mon ami.” “I shall lend the books to my friend.”
 “Je lui prêterai les livres.” “I shall lend him the books.”
 [I to-him shall-lend the books.]

The following are examples of SOV languages:

Basque: “Hau Donostiako autobusa da.” “This is the San Sebastian bus.”
 [This San Sebastian-of bus-the is.]

Persian: “iran mivehaye xub darad” “Iran has good fruit.” [Iran fruit-of good has.]

Turkish: “Karakol, evimizden uzak değildir.” “The police-station is not far from our house.”
 [Police-station, house-our-from far is-not.]

Hindi: “vah uccatar adhyayan ke lie āksfarḍ cale gae”
 “He went to Oxford for advanced study.”
 [He advanced study-for Oxford went.]

Japanese:

“Maeda-san wa kinō kuruma o katta.” “Mr Maeda bought a car yesterday.”
[Maeda-Mr_(topic) yesterday car_(object) bought.]

Inuit: “Akkamma aataaq aallaavaa.” “My uncle shot the harp seal.”
[Uncle-my_(agent) harpseal shoot-he-it.]

Welsh, Irish, Arabic, and Maori are VSO languages:

Welsh: “Y mae’r bachgen yn darllen llyfr yn y tŷ wrth y tân.”
“The boy is reading a book in the house by the fire.”
[Is the boy in reading book in the house by the fire.]
“Cerddai ef dros y mynydd yn yr haf.”
“He used to walk over the mountain in summer.”
[Used-to-walk he over the mountain in the summer.]

Irish: “Òlann an garsùn an bainne.” “The boy drinks the milk.” [Drinks the boy the milk.]
“Díolfaidh Máire an t-im sa tsráidbhaile.” “Mary will sell the butter in the village.”
[Will-sell Mary the butter in-the village.]

Arabic: “yaltamisu l-luḡawiyūna tafsīran” “The linguists are seeking an explanation.”
[Are-seeking the-linguists explanation.]

Maori: “E tuhituhi ana a Maria i te ripoata.” “Maria is writing the report.”
[Is-writing the Maria_(object) the report.]

“Me karanga atu koe ki a ia.” “You had better call to him.”
[Ought call away you to the him.]³

The correlation between the location of restrictive qualifiers and the location of the verb is:

Qualifiers →	Before noun	After noun	Both before and after
SVO	Chinese, German (main clause)	Romance languages, Indonesian, Swahili	English, Finnish, Hungarian, Greek, Russian
SOV	Turkish, Hindi, Japanese, Basque, German (subordinate clause)	Persian, Inuit	
VSO		Welsh, Irish, Arabic, Maori	

Past studies of word order have suggested that there exists a correlation between:

- Languages which post-qualify the noun, use prepositions, and are SVO, such as the Romance languages, Indonesian, and Swahili. These are called “right-branching” and are held to follow the principle “qualifier follows qualified”.
- Languages which pre-qualify the noun, use postpositions, and are SOV, such as Turkish, Hindi, and Japanese. These are called “left-branching” and are held to follow the principle “qualifier precedes qualified”.

This traditional analysis uses the terms “left-branching” and “right-branching” in a wider sense than we have suggested. Although it has some statistical validity⁴, it is not valid as a firm rule of language design, for the following reasons:

³ Foster, 51.

⁴ Discussed in detail in Dryer (2002).

- (a) There are major languages which do not conform to it, such as Chinese (which pre-qualifies the noun but is SVO), Persian and Inuit (which post-qualify the noun but are SOV), and Finnish and Hungarian (which are SVO but mainly use postpositions). Further review would identify many others.
- (b) There are major SVO languages (English, Greek, Russian, etc) which do not follow either of the strict “qualifier-qualified” rules.
- (c) It cannot be said that a verb is qualified by its object. A verb specifies the action or state of its subject. An object is a noun or phrase which is connected to the subject by that action or state. The word or expression which qualifies a verb is an adverbial, but not an object.
- (d) There is no consistency between the rules for a subject-verb-object sentence in which there is not an element in focus and one in which there is. This is discussed under (iii) below.
- (e) There is no consistency between the rules for a subject-verb-object sentence and those for an existential sentence. This is discussed under (iv) below.

A few further examples illustrate the first of these points. Japanese is an SOV language which is left-branching and which uses postpositions:

Japanese:

“Sono tera wa Kyōto ni aru.” “That temple is in Kyoto.”
 [That temple _(topic) Kyoto-in there-is.]

Persian is an SOV language which is right-branching and which uses prepositions:

“Sa’adi az šo’araye ma’rufe iran ast.” “Sa’adi is among the famous poets of Iran.”
 [Sa’adi among poets-of famous-of Iran is.]

Inuit is an SOV language which is right-branching and which uses postpositions:

“Angummut ippassaq naapitannut tunniuppara.”
 “I gave it to the man I met yesterday.” [Man-to yesterday met-my-to give-I-him.]

Finnish is a SVO language which mainly uses postpositions. It locates postpositional qualifiers before the element qualified:

“Aurinko paistaa ikkunan läpi.” “The sun shines through the window.”
 [Sun shines window-through.]
 “Tunnin jälkeen menen kapakkaan.” “After the lesson I’m going to the pub.”
 [Lesson-after go-I pub-to.]

Hungarian only uses postpositions. The standard word order of the dynamic sentence is “topic-focus-verb-comment”, where “focus” is the principal new element in the comment and “comment” is all other elements. “Focus” (marked _(f) in these examples) can mean an aspect particle, adverbial, negative particle, interrogative word, or (in the absence of any of these) an object:

“Az orvos megvizsgálja a beteget.” “The doctor will examine the patient.”
 [The doctor _{(perfective) (f)} examines the patient.]
 “Nyolc óra körül vacsorázunk.” “We eat dinner around eight o’clock.”
 [Eight hour-around _(f) we-have-dinner.]
 “Ki olvas könyvet?” “Who is reading a book?” [Who _(f) reads book?]
 “Denes nem olvas könyvet.” “Denes is not reading a book.”
 [Denes not _(f) reads book.]
 “Denes könyvet olvas a nappaliban.” “Denes is reading a book in the living room.”
 [Denes book _(f) reads the living-room-in.]

In stative Hungarian sentences, either the topic or the comment may occur first:

“A fiúk magasak.” “The boys [are] tall.”
 “Gyulának két húga van.” “Gyula has two younger sisters.”
 [To-Gyula two younger-sister-her are.]

“Drága volt a szemüveg.” “The glasses were expensive.”
 [Expensive were the glasses.]
 “Láza van a lányomnak.” “My daughter has a fever.”
 [Fever-her is the daughter-my-to.]

(iii) To place an element in focus.

Chapter 1. referred to focus as an exceptional sentence structure, in which one item is selected as the sole piece of new information, often in contrast to an alternative. We saw that it is indicated either by a particle or by a rule of word order. If word order is used, three different methods exist, which vary between languages: the focus is placed at the end of the sentence, at the start of the sentence, or just before the verb. In the following examples, the word in focus is identified with _(f), and unstressed sentences are included for comparison:

At the end of the sentence:

German: “Die Studenten unterrichten zu diesen Zeiten die Kinder.”	SVO
“The students teach the children at these times.”	(unstressed)
[The students teach at these times the children.]	
“Zu diesen Zeiten unterrichten die Kinder die Studenten.”	VOS
“It is the students who teach the children at these times.”	(focus)
[At these times teach the children the students _(f) .]	

Spanish: “Mi secretaria ha escrito una carta.”	SVO
“My secretary has written a letter.”	(unstressed)
“Esta carta la escribió mi secretaria.”	OVS
“It was my secretary who wrote this letter.”	(focus)
[This letter it wrote my secretary _(f) .]	

Turkish: “Ressam bize resimlerini gösterdi.”	SVO
“The artist showed us his pictures.”	(unstressed)
[Artist to-us pictures-his showed.]	
“Bize resimlerini ressam gösterdi.”	OSV
“It was the artist who showed us his pictures.”	(focus)
[To-us pictures-his artist _(f) showed.]	

Japanese:	
“Kudamono wa Nihon de oshii.”	SOV
“The fruit in Japan is delicious.”	(unstressed)
[Fruit _(topic) Japan-in delicious-is.]	
“Nihon de oishii no wa kudamono da.”	SOV
“What is delicious in Japan is fruit.”	(focus)
[Japan-in delicious being _(topic) fruit _(f) is.]	

Turkish and Japanese follow a strict verb-final rule. The element in focus is placed at the last position possible before the verb. These languages therefore also qualify among those placing it just before the verb.

At the start of the sentence:

Welsh: “Collodd y dyn ei fag ar y trên ddoe.”	VSO
“The man lost his bag on the train yesterday.”	(unstressed)
[Lost the man his bag on the train yesterday.]	

	“Y dyn a gollodd ei fag ar y trêrn ddoe.”	SVO
	“It was the man who lost his bag on the train yesterday.”	(focus)
	[The man _(f) who lost his bag on the train yesterday.]	
	“Ei fag a gollodd y dyn ar y trêrn ddoe.”	OVS
	“It was his bag that the man lost on the train yesterday.”	(focus)
	[His bag _(f) which lost the man on the train yesterday.]	
Irish:	“Is inné a tháinig sé.” “It was yesterday _(f) that he came.”	OVS
	[Is yesterday that came he.]	(focus)
	“Is é a tháinig inné.” “It was he _(f) who came yesterday.”	SVO
	[Is he who came yesterday.]	(focus)
Arabic:	“yukallifu l-dawlata mabāliya ɖaxmatan”	VSO
	“It costs the state huge amounts.”	(unstressed)
	[Costs the-state amounts huge.]	
	“qad balaya l-hayʔata kalāmun kaθīrun ḥawla l-mawḏūʔi”	VOS
	“Much talk about the subject reached the board.”	(unstressed)
	[Reached the-board much talk about the-subject.]	
	“ʔiḏā hiya rayibat fī ḏālika”	SVO
	“if [it is] she _(f) who desires that”	(focus)
	“kanāt sanʔaʔu hiya hājisahu l-jadīda”	VOS
	“It was Sanʔa that was his new concern.”	(focus)
	[Was Sanʔa _(f) it concern-his the-new.]	
Maori:	“I haere rātou ki te hui.” “They went to the gathering.”	VSO
	[Did go they to the gathering.]	(unstressed)
	“Ko rātou i haere ki te hui.”	SVO
	“It was they _(f) who went to the gathering.” ⁵	(focus)
English:	“I visited my friend on Tuesday.”	SVO
		(unstressed)
	“It was on Tuesday _(f) that I visited my friend.”	OSV
		(focus)
Inuit:	“Pitaamuna arviq tuqukka.”	SVO
	“It was Pitaaq _(f) who killed the whale.”	(focus)
	[Pitaaq _(agent) -that whale killing-he-it.]	
	“Arviquna Pitaap tuqutaa.”	SVO
	“It is the whale _(f) killed by Pitaap.”	(focus)
	[Whale-that Pitaap _(agent) killed-his.]	

In Welsh, Irish, Arabic, Maori, the verb starts the sentence when no element is in focus, but an element in focus is put in front of the verb. These languages therefore also qualify among those placing it just before the verb.

Basque and Hungarian generally places the principal new element in the comment before the verb. This may require a change in the unstressed word order if the new element is in focus:

Basque:	“Aste Santuan etxera joango da.”	SOV
	“He’s going home at Easter.”	(unstressed)
	[Easter-at home-to will-go he-is.]	
	“Aste Santuan joango da etxera.”	SVO
	“Easter is when he is going home.”	(focus)
	[Easter at (f) will-go he-is home-to.]	

Hungarian:

⁵ Foster, 69.

“Reggel a gyerekek a kertben játszanak.” “In the morning the children play in the yard.” [Morning the children the yard-in _(f) play.]	SOV (unstressed)
“A gyerekek reggel játszanak a kertben.” “It is in the morning that the children play in the yard.” [The children morning _(f) play the yard-in.]	SVO (focus)

In Chapter 1. (Focus) includes also examples in which the element in focus is marked with a particle. The correlation between the word order of an unstressed sentence and the position of an element in focus is:

Focus element ↓	SVO	SOV	VSO
Before the verb	Hungarian	Basque, Turkish, Japanese	Welsh, Irish, Arabic, Maori
At sentence end	Romance languages, German, Russian	Turkish, Japanese	
At sentence start	English, Greek, Swahili	Inuit	Welsh, Irish, Arabic, Maori
Identified with a particle	Finnish, Indonesian, Chinese	Hindi	

The most consistent pattern is that VSO languages generally place an element in focus before the verb. The significance of this seems to be clear. These languages are structured so that the principal element of the comment comes first, followed by the topic, followed by the rest of the comment. For a sentence without a focus, the principal element of the comment is the verb. When there is a focus, it is the element in focus.

SVO and SOV languages adopt three different policies:

- (a) The element in focus is placed in an unusual position with respect to the verb, either at the end of the sentence or immediately before the verb.
 - (b) The sentence is clefted. The element in focus is isolated at the start of the sentence, which then becomes “focus-topic”. In effect, this is the same policy as that of the VSO languages, and may be combined with policy (i).
 - (c) The word order is not altered, and the focus is marked with a particle.
- (iv) To identify the subject of an existential sentence.

Existential sentences consist of three elements: the object whose existence is being asserted or denied (O); the existential verb (positive or negative) (V); and the factual background to the statement or circumstance (C). The following VOC languages usually also use CVO forms:

- VOC: English: “There is a fly in the ointment.”
 French: “Il y a des plumes sur la table.” “There are pens on the table.”
 Spanish: “Hay un gato en el tejado” “There is a cat on the roof.”
 German: “Es gibt Leute, die Spechen leicht lernen.”
 “There are people who learn languages easily.”
 [It gives people, who languages easily learn.]
 Welsh: “Y mae llyfr ar y bwrdd.” “[There] is [a] book on the table.
 Irish: “Bíonn aonach sa bhaile mhór uair sa mhí.”
 “[There] is [a] fair in the town once a month.”
 Arabic: “ʾθammata waqtun fašilun bayna l-wušūli wa-l-ʾiqlāʾi”
 “There is a time separating arrival and departure.”
 [There time separating between the-arrival and the-departure.]

- Swahili: “Patakuwa na maji mengi hapa.” “There will be much water here.”
[Will-be with water much there.]
- CVO: Basque: “Ondoan badago parke eder bat.” “Next to it there is a lovely park.”
[Nearby there-is park beautiful a.]
- German: “In der Ecke steht ein Stuhl.” “There is a chair in the corner.”
[In the corner stands a chair.]
- Hungarian:
“Régi könyvek vannak a szekrényben.”
“There are old books in the cupboard.”
[Old books there-are the cupboard-in.]
- Russian: “Pri gostinitse est’ pochta” “There is a post-office in the hotel.”
[In hotel there-is post-office]
- Malay: “Di seberang sungai ada rumah.” “Across the river there is a house.”
[Across river there-is house.]
- Chinese: “Jingzi pángbiān yǒu yī pén huā.”
“There is a pot of flowers besides the mirror.”
[Mirror besides there-is one pot flower.]
- COV: Turkish: “köşede bir kahve var” “There is a café on the corner.”
[Corner-at a café there-is.]
- Hindi: “Mez par pustak hai.” “There is a book on the table.”
[Table-on book is.]
- Japanese:
“Kono machi ni wa daigaku ga mittsu arimasu.”
“There are three universities in this town.”
[This town-in _(topic) universities _(subject) three there-are.]
- Inuit: “Nutaamik umiarsuarnut talittarviqarpuq.”
“There is a new harbour for ships.”
[New-with ships-for harbour-there-is.]
- OVC: Finnish: “Ruokaa on pöydällä.” “There is some food on the table.”
[Food _(partitive) is table-on.]

The only evident correlation between the word order in these existential sentences and sentences with a subject, verb, and object is that in SOV languages, the existential order is background-object-verb.