**Laura IONICĂ, University of Piteşti**

# ASPECTS AND OSCILLATIONS OF WORD ORDER WHEN TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

The present study aims to reveal a few aspects regarding the word order when teaching a foreign language, starting from the many oscillations that occur both in the source language and the target language. As an English teacher I found it useful to make a contrastive study between English and Romanian in order to highlight some difficulties my students usually encounter when translating a text from one language into another.

There is a mental organization of every utterance, which imposes to the spirit as a possibility to reflect the situations we usually face, especially as a reference to the one who thinks and communicates, in the sense that the subject refers himself to the world, thus becoming the subject of the utterance (*I take, I wish, I eat*).

Therefore, by the nature of things, the subject establishes a linguistic structure which has the grammatical subject in the first position, thus generalizing the thinking way of the one who formulates a judgement, whose purpose is to attribute a property to the subject.

The structure of the sentence is specified by the language, being determined by certain grammatical features (inflections or affixes), which indicate the functions and syntactic relations of the words, regardless of their position in the sentence. This shows that synthetic languages have a freer word order as compared to analytic languages where it is more strict.

It is obvious that determinative and propositional structures could change both in terms of word order and the rules imposed by this order. As regards synthetic languages, the spoken language is closer to natural structures which are more fixed, causing a relatively fixed word order in Romance languages.

In the case of synthetic languages, inflections indicate the role of words in the sentence, while the order in which words appear expresses the rich repertoire of the utterance meanings. When word order is relatively free, it can be exploited stylistically. For this reason, analytic languages with a relatively fixed topic cannot create stylistic nuances by changing the position of elements. Transformation of a source language into another language usually implies certain changes as regards word order at the syntagmatic level.

Such an organization is not always restored by the evolution of the language. The phenomenon is noticeable in case of grammaticalization of topic, in the sense that the order of words reveals their syntactic functions within the sentence or syntagmatic structures.

Word order is a fundamental structural property of languages, showing considerable cross-linguistic variation. Languages differ from one another in the order of constituents. When people refer to the position of elements in the language, they refer specifically to the order of subject, object, adverb with respect to each other, but word order refers more generally to the order of any set of elements, either at the clause level or within phrases.

Grammarians have described the phenomenon in different terms:

> *The distribution of words in a sentence and the distribution of sentences, of course, independent ones, is free…But the meaning of the statement that* ***word order is free*** *should be properly understood, i.e. it is not absolutely free, but only in the sense that each sentence and each sentence element, except for some specific, defined cases…can occupy any position in the language unit: the beginning, the end or any other position within the unit.* (Stevanović, 1969: 878).

Quirk et al makes reference to the *strict limitations of the ordering of clause elements…After V, S is the least movable element, followed by O and C* (Quirk et al, 1991: 51).

In sentences like *The bee stung the child* and *The child stung the bee*, by changing the word order, we change the syntactic relations between the elements and inevitably their meaning. Romanian has been chosen as a constrastive language, since there are a lot of unclear issues of how to translate an English sentence and keep the same order in Romanian.



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In English, which is an analytic language, the word order is very strict, the wors having a strict position in the sentence. A simple SPO sentence like *My cousin knew the address*, cannot exist otherwise that this way in English, unlike Romanian, where it can be translated as *Vărul meu ştia adresa, Adresa o ştia vărul meu, Adresa vărul meu o ştia*.

Word order can be regarded from two perspectives: syntactic or grammatical, where it is conditioned only by the syntactic and semantic relationships within the sentence and contextual or pragmatic, the sentence being a part of a larger context and the word order being conditioned by the context of the utterance.

The two obligatory functional constituents of a sentence are the subject and the verb: *Birds fly, The sun is shining*. Unlike English, where the SV order is fixed, in Romanian the sentences can be transformed into the VS forms which are contextually marked sentences: *Zboară păsările, Străluceşte soarele*. In order to better understand the phenomenon of word order it is necessary to emphasize the position of elements in the sentence.

**Place of the subject**

The proper place of the subject in English is at the beginning of the sentence, as compared to Romanian, where there is much freedom in placing the subject:

> *My brother watched an adventure film on DVD* is usually translated as *Fratele meu a văzut un film de aventuri pe DVD, Un film de aventuri a văzut fratele meu pe DVD*; *Not a man passed that way for a long time* implies different Romanian variants: *Pe acolo n-a trecut niciun om de mult timp, Niciun om n-a trecut pe acolo de mult timp, Pe acolo n-a trecut de mult timp niciun om*.

The English language is known to have developed a tolerably fixed word order which in the majority of cases shows without fail what is the subject of the SPO sentence. Authors agree that

> *…the natural order of words in an English sentence may be altered for some good reason as long as the alteration does not result in an absurdity. Therefore, we must draw the conclusion that the subject is always placed first; it may be in the middle or even in the end of the sentence.* (Golovina, T., *The problem of analytical forms in modern English, Grammar Structure*, Riga, 1977: 20): *Mother has been cooking, My hard-working mother has been cooking for 3 hours, A talented person she will be in the next few years*.

**Place of the predicate**

Place of the predicate is well illustrated in the difference between SPO sentences and PSO sentences. The first category comprises:

a. affirmative and negative sentences: *She was riding a nice bike*;
b. interrogative sentences beginning with a *wh-* word: *Who gave you that scarf?*
c. indirect interrogative sentences: *He doesn't know where those people come from*.

PSO sentences are illustrated in:

a. interrogative sentences: *Did she drive on the left ?*
b. exclamatory sentences: *Leave that building at once!*
c. conditional sentences: *Were you in her place, you would manage the situation better*.
d. imperative sentences: *Don't you dare tell another lie to him!*
e. emphatic structures: *The sergent is the man who was severely wounded.*

**Place of the object**

Its normal position is after the predicate, except for the exclamatory structures where the direct object may occupy the first place. It is generally inverted for purposes of emphasis in constructions such as: *Step after step did he take, Corner after corner he explored to discover the Holy Grail*.

**Place of the indirect object**

This element usually precedes the direct object and cannot be used without it. In terms of selection, a sentence like *Give Martin the dictionary*, has better fluency that *Give the dictionary to Martin* which is more emphatic and capable of giving rise to unconscious contrast of person.



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**The Prepositional Object** stands in an intermediate position between other two objects and the adverbial modifiers: *He hasn't revealed her anything about it*. However, it is more related to the function of the predicate than the adverbial modifier.
**Attributes** modify nouns so their place is before the noun: *She is my good friend*. Close attributes form a tight unit with their nouns, unlike loose attributes which are less tightly connected with their nouns. Close attributes are revealed in examples like *He admired her way of handling things*, whereas loose attributes are illustrated in sentences like *Sad and tomented the woman ran away from home*.

Another issue that is worth mentioning when teaching word order is related to the position of adjectives which in Romanian is less strict due to the more flexibility of our language. English encounters quite fixed rules, adjectives being ordered according to: characteristic, dimension, shape, age, colour, origin, material etc.:

*a few large red apples (cateva mere mari rosi), a beautiful new blue European car (o maşină europeană frumoasă nouă albastră), black Italian leather furniture (mobilă din piele neagră italiană).*

The order of adjectives should always be taught along with the exceptions form the rule, in which case their position in similar to that in Romanian:

*Secretary General, Attorney General, Heir Apparent, Knight Errant, Court Martial, Poet Laureate* etc.

**Adverbial modifiers of place** are normally placed after the direct object or the verb and either at the beginning or at the end of the sentence: *Spanish is spoken in a few countries, In the mountains it has snowed a lot*. Romanian learners should certainly refrain from beginning their sentences with : *In our town, in France, In Bucharest*, using instead the position at the end of the sentence. However , *In my town it rains a lot in spring* can be translated as *Primăvara plouă mult în oraşul meu* or *Plouă mult primăvara în oraşul meu*.

On the other hand, a sentence like *In Pitesti there is an orchestra* creates an unwanted effect for a foreigner, who might infer that Piteşti is the only town that boasts an orchestra. Therefore, it is advisable to use the normal unemphatic word order *There is an orchestra in Piteşti*.

A sentence like *I am going to the circus tomorrow* is usually rendered as *Mâine mă duc la circ, Mă duc la circ mâine, Mă duc mâine la circ*. In another construction like *There was a great stir in the house after dinner*, the adverbial modifier of place sometimes precedes that of time, while in Romanian it is placed in front of the sentence: *După cină toată lumea era în fierbere*.
**The adverbial modifier of time** is usually placed at the beginning or at the end of the sentence: *She has lived in Braşov for ten years*. A sentence like *Smith felt he would like to spend a night with her before the engagement* is rendered into Romanian with the adverbial modifier of time in front position, although the meaning remains the same: *Înainte de logodnă, Smith a simţit nevoia să petreacă o noapte cu ea*.
**The adverbial modifier of manner** is placed behind the direct object, as compared to Romanian where it can appear in front of the direct object: *She rode the bike carefully* (*A condus bicicleta cu grijă / A condus cu grijă bicicleta*).
**Adverbial modifiers of purpose and concession** are always placed at the end of the sentence just like in Romanian: *She only works for fame* (*Munceşte doar pentru faimă*).
**Adverbials modifiers of frequency and degree** precede the predicate, but follow the verb *to be* and all modal verbs: *He is always good at drawing*. Sometimes they occupy the first place without causing inversion: *Often she had asked me to join her abroad*.

The position of elements in the sentence reflect both convergent and divergent perspectives as regards the word order in English and Romanian.

Another aspect arising questions among learners is related to the order of genitive and noun in English that reveals two constructions, one in which the genitive precedes the noun (*the book's cover*), the other in which the genitive follows the noun (*the cover of the book*). Students find it hard to grasp the difference between synthetic and analytic genitive or at least, they can't make the difference between the two usages, unless they are clearly



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explained the two contexts. The strategy is to try to identify one of the two orders in a more basic sense.

In the case of genitive and noun order, English should be classified as GN /NG, as a language in which both orders occur and in which there are no strong arguments for treating one of these orders as basic.

The GN constructions use the order commonly associated with verb-final languages, while the NG constructions use the order associated with verb-initial languages.

Some other errors are present in clauses which are used to introduce thematically important new referents into discourse. In English, they are introduced by unstressed *there* followed by the verb *to be* and a noun group which works as the notional subject: *There is a woman sitting on a bench* is translated as *Pe bancă stă o femeie*. A few other verbs like *seem, appear, arise, remain, follow* are used after *there* in a similar way: *There appears to be an error in the system, There arises a problem related to global dimming*.

Such structures arise difficulties among learners who usually translate a sentence like *Pe masă este o cană cu ceai* as **On the table is a cup of tea*, which is acceptable only in elliptical speech.

The presence of the direct object in front position when expressed by the group of words *many a, not a* also generates obstacles in translation, due to the phenomenon of inversion. A sentence like *De multe ori am vorbit cu el despre asta* should be normally translated as *I have spoken to him many times about it*, instead of the more complex stylistic variant *Many a time have I spoken to him about it*.

The position of the word *enough* may also mislead learners. When it functions as an adjective, it precedes the noun it modifies: *Has he got enough money / time?* As an adverb, it has a freer position in the sentence, especially after the adjective or adverb it determines: *The film is interesting enough, He speaks fluently enough*.

These are only a few of the numerous aspects of word order and their conceptualization both in English and Romanian. Word order is a crucial syntactic issue in many languages. In English it has peculiarities which have been caused by the concrete and specific ways the language has developed. The position of a word in a sentence may be changed within the recognized variants and the models are the personalization of the variants.

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**ABSTRACT**

*Any language possesses different ways of ordering the elements of the utterance starting from the permissible objective organization imposed by the norm of the language. Both determinative and propositional structures can be related to logical entities that human thinking organizes so that they should be adequately expressed within the language. There is a mental organization of the utterance that can be imposed to the spirit as an efficient way to reflect events in the surrounding world related to the one who thinks and communicates. The sentence structure is specific to each language and is determined by certain grammatical features which indicate the syntactic functions of words. Synthetic languages generally have a free word order, as compared to analytic languages which have a more reduced inflection.*



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