

ON FUNCTION OF WORD ORDER IN ENGLISH AND SERBIAN

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Slobodanka Kitić

University of Niš, Faculty of Philosophy, English Department

Abstract. *In this article the author investigates the phenomenon of word order in English and Serbian. Though most of the grammarians would say that Serbian word order is free, while the English one is fixed, word order in English and Serbian still share some properties. However, due to their different nature, Serbian being a synthetic language vs. English as an analytic one, word order seems to have dissimilar functional values in the two languages. In English it is the main syntactic means, while in Serbian it is mainly a pragmatic, textual and stylistic means. So, in the grammar-triangle, from meaning and use (or function), it is only that the form is the same - their meaning and use are different in the two languages, making them more a homonymic language phenomenon than anything else.*

While it is relatively easy to find some rules in English language word order, it is rather difficult to establish any definite rules for that in Serbian. "The distribution of words in a sentence and the distribution of sentences, of course interdependent ones, is - free. And it is basically, or rather mainly, true. But the meaning of the statement *that the 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 (we think of the enclitic forms which cannot take the initial position in a sentence - e.g. in the literary language), of course, generally speaking, can occupy any position in the language unit: the beginning, the end or any other position within the unit." (Stevanović, 1969: 878) But some grammarians, being aware of the limitations mentioned above, have modified the statement as follows: "Word order is not absolutely free, but relatively free, because each word cannot occupy any position in a sentence." (Milinović, 1987: 18) Thus the assertion that "the order of sentence elements in Serbocroatian is mainly free" (Milinović, 1987:53) seems to be tough wide, the most precise definition of word order in Serbian.

On the other hand, word order in English is fixed, or to be more precise, "the positions of subject, verb and object are relatively fixed." (Quirk et al., 1991: 51) But *being relatively fixed* is obviously, if not opposite then not the same as *being mainly free*. The following explanation defines the difference: "English does indeed have strict limitations

of the ordering of clause elements ... After V, S is the least movable element, followed by O and C." (Ibid.: 51)

Consider the following example:

- E 1. The dog bit the man.
- E 2. The man bit the dog.

By changing the word order in the sentence we change the syntactic relationships between the elements. In E 1., the subject (S) is *the dog*, and the object (O) is *the man*. In E. 2., the subject is *the man*, and the object is *the dog*. In fact, there are two noun phrases - *the dog* and *the man* and one verb - *bite* whose semantic features¹ allow the collocation of both types: *the dog bit* and *the man bit*. So, by changing the word order in the sentence we change its meaning.

In Serbian, on the other hand, by changing the word order (the position of S and O) we do not change the syntactic relations between the elements, so each of the previous sentences can have two syntactic forms.

- S 1. Pas je ujeo čoveka.
Čoveka je ujeo pas.
- S 2. Čovek je ujeo psa.
Psa je ujeo čovek.

Since all the elements of the sentence share the same semantic features in both languages, only the formally marked object in Serbian differentiates the possible syntactic structures i.e. the direct object being the accusative - *čoveka* in S 1. and *psa* in S2., the two possibilities of both structures are grammatically correct. Cf.

- E 3. The man kicked the ball.
- E 4. * The ball kicked the man.
- S 3. Čovek je šutnuo loptu.
Loptu je šutnuo čovek.
- S 4. * Lopta je šutnula čoveka.
* Čoveka je šutnula lopta.

where due to the semantic features of the verb *šutnuti* (to kick)² only one sentence (with two possible structure forms) is possible.

Word order can be viewed from two points of view: *syntactic* (where the word order is conditioned only by the syntactic and semantic relationships within the sentence) and *contextual* (the sentence being a part of a larger context and thus the word order in it being conditioned by the context of the utterance). The former we could call the grammatical word order, the latter the contextual or pragmatic word order.³ Some authors make the distinction between "context-not included" and "context-included" word order or components, or divide word order into "the basic semantic-grammatical" or "abstract word order" and "actualized word order". (Silić, 1984: 9)

This paper will deal with some general aspects of word order in the two languages. We will consider the grammatical word order in a basic grammatical unit, a simple sen-

¹ Besides being transitive, the verb *bite* also requires an animate subject, and so the interchange of the two (*man* and *dog*) is semantically possible. The same is true of the Serbian verb *ujesti*.

² The verb *kick* (*šutnuti*), in English and Serbian alike, requires a human subject, so the change of the position of *the man* and *the ball* is not semantically possible.

³ Compare with Silić, 1978: 356.

tence - statement - in English as compared with the possible Serbian word order equivalents. The simple sentence "ie the sentence consisting of a single independent clause" is considered "the most central part of grammar." (Quirk et al., 1991: 47) The traditional grammar definition of a (simple) sentence as "a full predication containing a subject plus a predicate with a finite verb" is the most appropriate one as it "includes both functional and formal characteristics of a sentence." (Frank, 1972: 220) According to this definition there are two obligatory functional constituents of a sentence, a subject (S) and a verb (V). Though the second element could either be named predicate or verb phrase just the term verb has been chosen, considering the verb itself "the most central element."⁴ (Op. cit.: 50)

Full sentences of the SV type are relatively rare in Serbian.

- S 5. Ptica leti.
- E 5. The bird is flying.
- S 6. Vetar duva.
- E 6.a. The wind is blowing.
- E 6.b. It is blowing.
- S 7. Kiša pada.
- E 7. It's raining.
- S 8. Sunce sija.⁵
- E 8. The sun is shining.

Both in Serbian and in English, sentences of this type mainly contain a noun phrase as the subject (*ptica* - *the bird*, *vetar* - *the wind*, *sunce* - *the sun*). All the sentences contain the progressive forms of the verbs, or so called durative verbs, in English and in Serbian (though the question of aspect in Serbian is rather complex). While in Serbian the aspect of the verb is contained in the verb itself (i.e. it is semantically determined) - e.g. *čitati* vs *pročitati*, (*to read* vs *to read up*) *leteti* vs *poleteti* or *odleteti*, (*to fly* vs *to fly off*) *duvati* vs *zaduvati* (*to blow* vs *to start to blow*), *padati* vs *pasti* (*to rain* vs *to have rained*), *sijati* vs *zasijati* (*to shine* vs *to have shined*) - in English the aspect is expressed both on the morphological and the syntactic level (*is flying*, *is blowing*, *is raining*, *is shining*). Within the SV form, some differences between sentence elements of the two languages occur when we deal with the contextual or marked word order. The fixed word order in English does not allow the slightest movement even on the simplest structure level, while in Serbian all the above sentences can be transformed into the VS forms, which are contextually marked sentences.

- S 5.a. Leti ptica.
- S 6.a. Duva vetar. (VS)
- S 7.a. Pada kiša. (VS)
- S 8.a. Sija sunce. (VS)

Sentences of this type are considered more informative, and the information is marked by pre-position. We can say

- S 5.a. Leti ptica. (VS)
- E 5.a. *Is flying the bird. (VS)

⁴ "The verb element (V) is the most central element." (Quirk, et al., 1991: 50)

⁵ All the Serbian examples (5, 6, 7 and 8) are taken from Stevanović, 1986:23.

if the bird was wounded and unable to do it before. Existential sentences of the SV type are unmarked and they can mainly be found in the written language. In the spoken language, when we want to communicate something new, the marked VS form is always used.

- S 5.a. Leti ptica. (VS)
- S 6.a. Duva vetar. (VS)
- S 7.a. Pada kiša. (VS)

And since the *wind* can only *blow*, the syncratic sentence of the V type is used.

- S 6.b. Duva. (V)
- E 6.b. *Is blowing. (V)

The sentence

- S 9. On radi. (SV)
- E 9. He is working. (SV)

has the unmarked SV order which corresponds to its English equivalent. But the sentence

- E 8. The sun is shining. (SV)

has two unmarked forms since the verb *sijati* is semantically marked⁶ by its original, recognizable collocative *sunce*:

- S 8. Sunce sija. (SV)
- S 8.a. Sija sunce. (VS)
- E 8.a. *Is shining the sun. (VS)

On the other hand, the sentence

- S 10. On sija (blista). (SV)
- E 10. *He is shining. (SV)

is considered as an unmarked SV form, while the syncratic sentence

- S 10.a. Sija (on). (V)

is considered as highly marked. The more precise sentence

- S 10.b. On sija od sreće. (SVCv)
- E 10.b. He is shining with absolute happiness. (SVCv)

(with a verb complement, Cv) has no other unmarked form.

The sentence

- S 10.c. Sija od sreće (on). (VCvS) is a marked structure.

Even the simplest sentence of the type SV illustrates the complexity of the problem of *word order* in Serbian in comparison with word order in English. The term "the basic semantic-grammatical word order" seems to reflect the nature of word order in Serbian, since only by the semantic features of the functional elements we can explain some of the differences between word order in the two languages.

The basic semantic feature of the Serbian verb *sijati* is its duration (progressive aspect) which the verb *shine* does not share, so that this innate semantic feature has to be

⁶ Ivić, M. 1973.

transposed onto the syntactic level of the English sentence with the present progressive tense.

The perfective aspect of the verb *shine*, on the other hand, can be transposed into Serbian by the perfective-aspect prefix *za - zasijati*.

E 10.d. (The fog became thin and) the sun shone through it.⁷

S 10.d. (Magla se razredi i) sunce kroz nju zasija.

The basic syntactic feature of the Serbian verb *sijati* is its intransitiveness, while the English verb *shine* can be both transitive and intransitive.

E 11.e. I asked him to shine the headlight on the door.⁸

S 11.e. *Zamolila sam ga da zasija ulazno svetlo.

The semantic field of the verb *shine* is much larger than the semantic field of the verb *sijati*.

Cf. *shine* - (Intr & Progressive) sijati, sjati, svetleti, granjavati, grejati, grajati;

shine - (Intr & Perfective) granuti, ogranuti; zasvetleti;

shine - (Tr & Progressive) svetleti, ozarivati; ucakljivati, usjajivati, bacati svetlost na;

shine - (Tr & Perfective) ozariti, ucakliti, usjajiti, baciti svetlost na;⁹

sijati - to shine, emit light;¹⁰.

The sentence

S 9. On radi. (SV)

E 9. He is working. (SV)

is considered to be of the unmarked form, while the sentence

S 9.a. Radi (on). (VS)

E 9.a. *Is working (he). (VS)

is a marked structure, which can be reduced to

S 9.b. Radi. (V)

E 9.b. *Is working. (V)

The reduction is possible due to the inflective nature of the Serbian language. The suffix *-i* indicates the number (singular), the aspect (progressive), the tense (present) and the person (third person singular). This type of verb form can be called (named) the *subject-including*, or, as the pronoun seems to be redundant, it can also be called the *subject-informative* verb form - the subject being defined by the verb form itself. It could be *on, ona, ono* (*he, she, it*).

Consider the following example.

S 12. Ja čitam. (SV)

E 12. I am reading. (SV)

This sentence has a syncratic V form

S 12.a. Čitam.

E 12.a. *Am reading.

⁷ Ristić, et al., 1955: Book II, 422-3

⁸ Sinclair, J., ed., 1990: 1335

⁹ Ristić, et al., 1955: Book II, 422-3

¹⁰ Benson, 1974: 580

The suffix *-m* here is highly subject-informative. It denotes the number (singular), aspect (progressive), tense (present) and the person (the first person singular).

Cf. S 13. Oni čitaju. (SV)

E 13. They are reading.(SV)

The verb form here, i.e. the suffix *-ju*, indicates the number (plural), aspect (progressive), tense (present) and the person (third person plural). So all of the present tense suffixes in Serbian are highly subject-informative: *-m* indicates the first person singular, *-š* the second person singular, *-a* - the third person singular, *-mo* the first person plural, *-te* the second person plural and *-ju* the third person plural.

The explanation that the Serbian language *is* inflective while the English language *is not*¹¹ seems to be neither sufficient nor precise enough for the difference between English and Serbian word order. It only makes word order in Serbian less syntactically informative than it is in English.

The inflective nature of Serbian seems not to play any important role as far as grammatical word order is concerned, but it is of great importance to contextual word order, the syncratic sentences being the best illustrations of it.

The English language has *only one* means of indicating syntactic relations between the (main) elements of the sentence. The Serbian language has two ways of expressing syntactic relations between the elements of the sentence - morphological and syntactic - word order being only of secondary importance. In other words, word order in Serbian only partly has the function of expressing the syntactic relations.

What new function has replaced the former syntactic function of word order in Serbian?

At this point, we may conclude that English word order is mainly neutral, while that of Serbian, except in the formal (written) language, is usually marked. It would be better to say that English word order is syntactically bound, while Serbian is communicatively bound. Word order in Serbian is dependent on the aim of communication (the functional element which carries the message i.e. the main information), the addresser and the addressee. Thus word order in Serbian carries the informative, pragmatic and stylistic values.

Here follow some further examples to illustrate the same point. The word order in the sentence

S 14. Ona čita knjigu. (SVO)

E 14. She is reading a book.(SVO)

represents an unmarked SVO structure. While the English language does not allow any change of the elements (SVO) at all, the Serbian language allows six combinations of the elements. If we mark the elements with numbers

ona -1 čita - 2 knjigu - 3

the six possible combinations are: 1-2-3, 1-3-2, 2-1-3, 2-3-1, 3-1-2 and 3-2-1. Except for the first one, all the other combinations are marked:

1. 1-2-3 Ona čita knjigu. - neutral
2. 1-3-2 Ona knjigu čita. -O marked (pre-position of V and O)
3. 2-1-3 Čita ona knjigu. -V marked (pre-position of S i V)
4. 2-3-1 Čita knjigu ona. -O marked (pre-positions of S and V and O and S)
5. 3-1-2 Knjigu ona čita. -O marked (pre-position of S and O)

¹¹ Sapir, E. (1921) *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company.

6. 3-2-1 Knjigu čita ona. -O marked (pre-positions of S and V and V and O)

This is also true of similar sentences of the SVOiOd type

E 15. I gave John the address. (SVOiOd)

S 15. Dala sam Jovanu adresu. (VOiOd)

There are many possible combinations of the sentence elements. The combinations are limited only by the enclitic form *sam* which cannot take either the initial or the final position in the sentence. In all the possible combinations the pre-position is used as the means of marking, and the word order is a) the pragmatic means by which we transfer the information, means by which we economize in language performance or b) a means by which we express our (language) individuality. The choice from the possibilities is made either by the frequency of use (neutral) or by the message (i.e. information) or by the style of the addresser. Compare with the previous example where there are several O-marked forms. However this is not true of the following example

S 16. Ja sam mu je dala. (SOiOdV)

E 16. I gave it to him. (SVODoi)

Due to the inflective ending *-m*, by which the subject is defined, and the enclitic forms *mu*, and *je*, the given sentence is the only possible Serbian unmarked equivalent which corresponds to the given English sentence. The number of the marked forms of this sentence is reduced to one

S 16.a. Dala sam mu je.

E 16.a. * Gave him it.

since the enclitic forms *mu* and *sam* cannot take any initial or final position, and the enclitic form *je* cannot occupy the initial position. On the other hand while the English language allows only the peripheral elements to change their positions¹² in the Serbian language both main and peripheral elements can occupy almost any position in a sentence. Consider the following example.

" My mother usually enjoys parties very much.(SAVOA)

Usually my mother enjoys parties very much. (ASVOA)

My mother enjoys parties very much, usually. (SVOAA)"

(Quirk et al., 1991: 51)

The above sentence can have many Serbian equivalents. Here follow some of the possibilities:

- Moja majka obično mnogo uživa u zabavama. (SAAVO)
- Moja majka mnogo uživa u zabavama, obično. (SAVOA)
- Moja majka u zabavama obično mnogo uživa. (SOAAV)
- Obično moja majka mnogo uživa u zabavama. (ASAVO)
- Obično u zabavama mnogo uživa moja majka. (AOAVS)
- Obično mnogo uživa u zabavama moja majka. (AAVOS)
- U zabavam obično mnogo uživa moja majka. (OAAVS)
- U zabavama obično moja majka mnogo uživa. (OASAV)
- U zabavama moja majka obično mnogo uživa. (OSAAV)
- Mnogo uživa, obično, u zabavama moja majka. (AVAOS)

¹² "English does indeed have strict limitations of the ordering of clause elements, but that the more peripheral an element is, the more freedom of position it has." (Quirk et al., 1991: 51)

- Mnogo uživa moja majka u zabavama obično. (AVSOA)

It is not true of the English sentence equivalents, and that is where the main difference is:

"*Usually enjoys parties my mother very much. (AVSOA)

*Enjoys usually my mother parties very much. (VASOA)

*My mother parties usually enjoys very much. (SOAVA)

The fact that these orders, and many others of the same elements, do not really occur, helps to explain why English is commonly described as a *fixed order language*." (Ibid.: 51)

On the contrary, word order in Serbian is *mainly free* and the previous example (the great number of its sentence-element combinations in Serbian) is but the best illustration of what *being mainly free* means. It might be said that the similar pragmatic aspect of word order in English is shown by intonation in the colloquial or short forms in the written language.

E (What is she doing?) Reading. (V-marked)

E (What is she reading?) A book. (O-marked)

But the pragmatic usages of this type are also present in Serbian, and still the question of the difference between the function of word order in English and Serbian has not been fully answered. Namely, we might come to the right answer only by defining the nature of word order in English and Serbian, and that leads us back to the nature of the language itself. The synthetic, inflective nature of the Serbian language as a whole has influenced the nature of word order as a part.¹³ Having partly lost its real syntactic function, due to its inflective nature, word order in Serbian has undertaken the pragmatic, or informational and stylistic function, making word order more the means of pragmatic and stylistic value than the means of syntactic nature. On the contrary, the analytic nature of the English language as a whole has defined word order as the means of the syntactic value.¹⁴ The same phenomenon thus serves different functions in the two languages.

Consider the following English example

E 17. She is reading a book. (SVO)

Whichever of the elements carries the message or information (e.g. it could be V - *read*), this is the only correct sentence form, and thus one has to hear or read the whole sentence in order to get the message.

In Serbian, on the other hand, the selection of information is done by the word order

S 17. Ona čita knjigu. (SVO - *subject marked - She not he*)

S 17.a. Čita ona knjigu. (VSO - *verb marked - is reading not writing*)

S 17.b. Knjigu ona čita. (OSV - *object marked - a book not a newspaper*)

By choosing between

S 17.b. Knjigu ona čita. (OSV - *object marked - a book and not a newspaper*) and

S 17.c. Knjigu čita ona. (OVS - *object marked - a book not a newspaper*)

we express our individual language preference - style. And not only that. The latter can even be used to emphasize the subject itself, depending on the context, intonation, etc.

¹³ "The more synthetic the language, in other words, the more clearly the status of each word in the sentence is indicated by its own resources, the less need is there for looking beyond the word to the sentence as a whole." (Sapir, 1921: 116)

¹⁴ "In an analytic language the sentence is always of prime importance, the word is of minor interest." (Sapir, 1921: 135)

Thus we could say in conclusion that:

- a) The grammatical word order is almost identical in both languages. Both English and Serbian are SVO languages.
- b) The contextual word order differs greatly. The contextual word order in English is only (if at all) slightly influenced (or ruled) by the informative structure of the sentence or the personal style of the speaker or writer, while on the other hand, the contextual word order in Serbian is mainly governed by both the informative structure of the sentence and the stylistic preference of the addresser.
- c) The synthetic, inflective nature of the Serbian language as a whole has influenced the nature of the word order as a part, making it *relatively free*, and thus more the means of pragmatic and stylistic values than the syntactic means. On the contrary, the analytic, isolating nature of the English language as a whole has defined word order as fixed, and thus the means of the syntactic value.
- d) Finally we can say that the difference between English and Serbian word order is partly a syntactic problem. So, though *word order* is discussed in both languages, having in mind the specific and different nature of the two languages, and the different functions it serves, we could say that word order in the two languages is but a *homonymic language phenomenon* - the same (syntactic) form with two different meanings.

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O FUNKCIJI REDA REČI U ENGLESKOM I SRPSKOM

Slobodanka Kitić

Obavljeno istraživanje fenomena reda reči u engleskom i srpskom jeziku nedvosmisleno upućuje na sledeće zaključke:

a) *Gramatički red reči je gotovo identičan u dvama jezicima, dok se kontekstualni ili pragmatički red reči značajno razlikuje.*

b) *Kontekstualni red reči u engleskom jeziku gotovo i da nije odredjen informativnom strukturom rečenice ili ličnim stilom onog ko govori ili piše. U srpskom jeziku je, međutim,*

kontekstualni red reči uglavnom podređen kako informativnoj strukturi iskaza, tako i stilističkoj preferenciji adresanta.

c) Sintetička, inflektivna priroda srpskog jezika odredila je red reči relevantnim pragmatičkim i stilističkim sredstvom, za razliku od reda reči u engleskom jeziku čija je analitička i reflektivna priroda definisala red reči najznačajnijim sintaksičkim sredstvom.

*d) Otuda je razlika između reda reči u engleskom i srskom jeziku samo delimično pitanje sintaksičke prirode. Naime, specifična i drugačija struktura dva jezika u celini nametnula je red reči, kao svom segmentu, različite, gotovo oprečne funkcije u dvama jezicima, te je kontrastivna ili komparativna analiza fenomena **reda reči** zapravo ništa drugo do analiza jednog homonimnog lingvističkog fenomena.*