Greenberg's Sixth Universal Revisited: The VSO/SVO Word Order Contrast in Early Egyptian

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1. INTRODUCTION. Greenberg's (1966:79) Universal 6 states: "All languages with dominant VSO order have SVO as an alternative or as the only alternative basic word order". Furthermore, VSO languages are always prepositional (Pr) (Universal 3), which is harmonic with VS as well as VO orders. In complex NPs, basic VSO order correlates with possessum–possessor (NG) and noun–adjective (NA) order (Universal 17). VSO languages of this (first) type [I/Pr/NG/NA] display a broad crosslinguistic distribution. Greenberg mentions Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic (Semitic), Berber, and Ancient Egyptian as cases in point (Appendix II.1, p.108). I shall revisit the issue, focusing on the VSO/SVO alternation in Early Egyptian, the earliest stage of the Ancient Egyptian language (2650–1990 BCE).

2. MAJOR CLAIMS. Early Egyptian meets the syntactic profile of the Sixth Universal insofar as it has VSO as the basic, and SVO as the alternative basic word order. However, several problems arise with respect to the notion of "basicness" the in Greenbergian word order correlations. In particular, VSO and SVO surface orders differ in the morphology of the finite verb and its semantic interpretation. Accordingly, VSO and SVO cannot be syntactic paraphrases of each other. There is another problem in regard to the VSO clausal pattern, which can be derived via different derivational routes.

3. WORD ORDER VARIATION THAT CORRELATES WITH MORPHOLOGICAL VARIATION. The VSO pattern is typically used for the description of dynamic eventualities (events, actions, and accomplishments). A morphological correlate of this is that the initial verb can be inflected for the entire inventory of the language's tense-aspect-mood (TAM) and passive voice markers. Consider in this regard (1), in which the main verb **j–rx** 'learns (about)' occurs a perception verb ("to recognize"). in the perfective aspect form and assumes an eventive interpretation that comes close to that of a perception verb ("to recognize"). The marked SVO alternative, on the other hand, denotes states resulting from prior events (resultatives) or states irrespective of their origin (qualitatives). The Stative verb form **rx–w** 'knows' is inflected for 3rd PERS. MASC. and denotes the possession of secret knowledge by the subject referent. Further, note that the presence of subject agreement on Stative verb forms excludes the presence of independent tense–aspect morphology. Regardless of how the VSO–SVO contrast is analyzed in structural terms (in this regard, Kramer 2009 and Reintges 2016 offer two different analyses), what is relevant here is that the VSO/SVO alternation is correlated with variation in other domains of the grammar (TAM/voice marking vs. agreement; eventive vs. stative predication).

4. WORD ORDER VARIATION THAT DOESN'T CORRELATE WITH MORPHOLOGICAL VARIATION. The basic VSO order does not line up with a single derivation. Rather, as shown by the contrast between (3) and (4), at least two types of VSO can be distinguished in terms of the exact placement of the subject and the verb. In (3), the subject *Hemen* is placed after the postverbal negation adverb **w** 'not'. The verb **ʃzp** 'will accept' appears in its perfective–neutral aspect form, with the obtained future denotation being a contextual feature. In (4), the subject *Thoth-nakht* precedes both the negation **w** and the adverbial focus particle **js**. Once again, the perfective aspect form of the verb **swr** assumes a future meaning 'will drink'. In cartographic work (e.g., Pollock 1989; Cinque 1999), clause-internal adverbs qualify as landmarks in the syntactic structure with fixed positions, while the verb, the subject and the object are syntactically more mobile. From this perspective, the resulting order VERB > NEGATION *w* > SUBJECT > DIRECT OBJECT would be indicative for a lower, VP-internal subject position. By contrast, the VERB > SUBJECT > NEGATION *w* > DIRECT OBJECT variant is indicative for a derived VP-external subject position. The two subject positions also correlate with different targets for finite verb movement. The tree structures in (5a–b) further illustrate this point.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS. Considering the semantic, morphological, and syntactic differences, the VSO and SVO word orders cannot be regarded as free syntactic variants, as Greenberg's Sixth Universal would seem to predict. Rather, one must distinguish between an unmarked VSO structure, in which the canonical subject resides in a lower position, and a marked VSO structure, in which non-canonical focused, quantified, and pronominalized subjects have been raised out of the VP to the specifier of TP. In sum, the dominant VSO order displays more syntactic diversity than meets the eye.

(1) Basic VSO order with eventive interpretation

j–rx	Pjpj	Pn	mwt=f
AUG–learn.PFV	Pepi	DEM.M.SG	mother.F.SG=POSS. 3M.SG

"This (King) Pepi (here) learns about his mother' (Pyramid Text 910a/P)

(2) Alternative SVO order with stative interpretation

D^{3}ḥwt(j)-nxt	pn	**rx–w**	rn	n(j)	wḥʕ–w
Thoth-nakht	DEM.M.SG	learn–STAT.3M	name.M.SG	LINK.M.SG	fowler–M.PL

"This Thoth-nakht (here) knows the names of the fowlers.' (Coffin Text VI 22o/B1Bo)

(3) VERB > NEGATION *w* > SUBJECT > DIRECT OBJECT

ʃzp	w	Ḥmn	jʃt=f	nb
accept.PFV	NEG	Hemen	thing.F.SG=POSS.3M.SG	each.M.SG

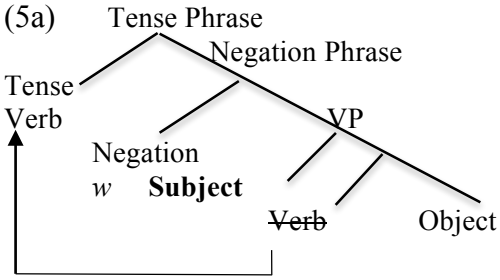
"(The god) Hemen will not accept any of his property." (Mo^{c}alla Inscription nr. 8, III.6)

(4) VERB > SUBJECT > NEGATION *w* > EMPHATIC PARTICLE *js* > DATIVE CLITIC > DIRECT OBJECT

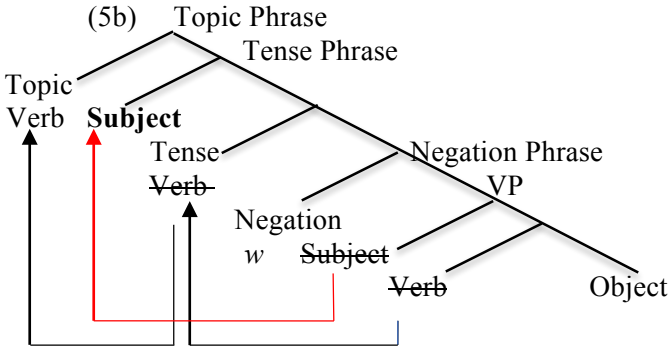
swr	D^{3}ḥwt(j)-nxt	w	js	n=sn	wzʃt
go.PFV	Thoth-nakht	NEG	EMPH	for=3PL	urine.F.SG

"This Thoth-nakht will surely not drink urine." (Coffin Texts VII 115j/B4Bo)

(5a)



(5b)



Unmarked VSO structure with canonical 'low' subject NP within the VP constituent

Marked VSO structure with non-canonical 'high' subject NP within the Tense Phrase

(N.B. Arrows indicate movement; strikeout mark the original position of the moved constituent)

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