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DOES THE VERB COME LAST IN YOUR LANGUAGE?

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Do sentences in your language end with verbs? If they do, it is important to know something about what is called "language typology". Language typology means the study of why the order of words in the sentence differs from one language to another.

The place where the verb comes in the sentence usually tells where the other words will come as well. This is important for translators if the language type they are translating into is different from the source language. English, French, Spanish, Hebrew and Greek are the languages Bible translators are usually working from. None of these have the verb at the end in the regular patterns. Hebrew and Spanish even have the verb first in many sentences. They also have sentences similar to the others with the subject first.

Translators working from these languages into languages with the verb at the end, can make their work easier and avoid many traps if they know that the word order differences from one language to another are largely predictable. This is because languages try to be clear and efficient. Things which cause confusion are changed around, until over the generations the easiest word order emerges. It has been found that this has resulted in similar word orders in each language type in regard to where the verb stands. For example, Margaret Langdon lists the expected order for subject-object-verb (SOV) languages ("Syntactic Change and SOV Structures", in C. Li, *Mechanisms of Syntactic Change*, pages 255-290). I personally took such a list to an international UBS translation workshop, and found it applied quite consistently to languages around the world. Verb-final languages (that is, languages in which the verb normally comes last in the sentence) make up around 30% of the world's languages, and share many of the same structures whether they are in Asia, Africa or the Americas.

What are some of the differences between verb-final languages and those such as our "source" languages with the verb near the beginning of the sentence? In this article I will discuss such differences one by one and suggest things the translator needs to watch out for. You have undoubtedly heard or read some translations which follow the word order of the source language so closely that they don't make sense. That is the obvious extreme which we must avoid. But on the other hand many less obvious distortions are carried over into verb-final language translations. They may make sense, but they don't sound natural. Knowing why things are arranged differently can help us to think through what the natural order is likely be in our own language. Of course every language has some peculiarities and exceptions from the normal patterns. So if a particular feature discussed below does not

apply to your verb-final language, consider it as an exception and keep what is natural in your language.

Case—not prepositions but postpositions

The relationship of a noun to the verb in the sentence is called “case”. In order to connect nouns to verbs, languages with verbs before the object have the markers in front of the nouns—such as the object marker *'et* in Hebrew, and various prepositions in Hebrew, Greek, English, French and Spanish. This makes the marker come between the two, such as in “go to town.” In contrast, languages with verbs at the end have the case markers attached to the end of nouns. This makes the connection between nouns of all cases come between them and their verb, such as “house-in slept.” The important thing for the translator is to get used to this difference. Usually the translator learns to change prepositions to postpositions very quickly.

English has a strict word order of subject-verb-object (SVO). It has dropped most subject and object case markers since the word order tells whether the noun is a subject or an object. This always forces the subject slot to be filled in English. So if the subject noun is not used, it will be replaced by a pronoun. If the word order is not strongly fixed in your language there is probably no need to always have such pronoun subjects since the case markers identify whether the noun is subject or object. In fact, if a verb-final language does not require the subject, it will probably develop some way to show whether the noun is subject or object. This is useful, since both subject and object come before the verb, and sentences such as “bird ate” will be ambiguous as to whether the bird was eater or eaten. At any rate translators always need to be careful that what they translate is not ambiguous. Various case markers or word order indicators in the source language may not exist in your language. You need to recognize this and give special care in the transfer to keep relationships clear.

Emphatic pronouns and word order

The situation in English mentioned above, where pronouns are used as subject markers, presents another problem for translators. In Greek, Hebrew, and most verb-final languages which have case marked by actual words or particles rather than by word order, pronouns which are fully written are normally emphatic. Spanish also has such emphatic pronouns. However, many translators work from English or one of the other modern languages and do not read Hebrew or Greek well enough to identify whether the pronouns stand for emphatic pronouns or are simply subject markers on the verb. Since verb-final languages (and many others) have the capacity to show this emphasis, special care needs to be taken not to miss it.

Emphasis is given in different ways in different languages. For example, if an English speaker wants to emphasize a pronoun he can pronounce it with more stress. The problem for the Bible translator is

that he won't see spoken emphasis in print. Moving words out of their natural order also makes them emphatic. Word order changes are very common in both Greek and Hebrew to give emphasis. For example, by moving a direct object to the beginning of the sentence it becomes prominent. Again, English with its fixed word order is not as free to move things around for emphasis. However, many verb-final languages do have sufficient person agreement and case markers to allow the same function of fronting or other word order changes to give emphasis. The translator who can't see these variations in Greek or Hebrew should pay attention to the handbooks and commentaries which note such emphasis.

Verbal auxiliaries

The general preference in verb-final languages for suffixes over prefixes is also seen with verbal auxiliaries. In the "source" languages mentioned above they normally come before the verb as in the English "has said", while in verb-final languages they follow the verb. There seems to be a function of the auxiliary in verb-final languages to "tie the sentence together", as one translator put it. This is seen in some verb-final languages which like to string gerunds or participles together. Finally, almost as a marker for the end of the paragraph or before a change of subject, the auxiliary is added, tying the initial subject to the final verb. In such cases it is important that the translator recognizes the larger discourse or paragraphing function of the verb-final language auxiliary as against "source" language auxiliaries in which indicating tense or aspect is a greater function than discourse.

The question particle

Another result of the preference for suffixes in verb-final languages is the position of the question particle. In Hebrew it comes first in the sentence, as is normal for languages with prefixes. But verb-final languages have the question particle at the end of the sentence. For example, Amharic adds *wey* at the end, and Afar lengthens a final vowel. The modern source languages with subjects first use other devices such as word order change marking the beginning of the question sentence. "He will go" becomes "Will he go?" without any special particles. If, as is likely, a particle exists in your verb-final language, don't fail to use it just because your modern source language doesn't have one.

Adverbs

Verb-final languages have adverbs before the verb. This is expected since the verb must be at the end of the sentence. Languages which are not verb-final normally have adverbs after verbs and objects. Care needs to be taken when an adverb stands between two verbs so that the word order of your language does not interfere. Otherwise mistakes will occur like "Having gone quickly, he returned today" being translated "Having gone, he quickly returned today".

Relative clauses

A relative clause is a clause which modifies a noun. In English such clauses are usually introduced by “who”, “which”, or “that”, as in “she is the girl who came.” The translator’s “source” languages normally prefer to have the clause after the noun. However, verb-final languages generally prefer having noun modifiers before the noun. There seem to be less problems in understanding if noun modifiers do not come between the verb and its object. The main words are kept closer by having modifiers on the edge in both language types: **modifier-object-verb** and **verb-object-modifier**.

Relative clauses are particularly difficult for translators into verb-final languages. Since the source languages have the relative clauses after the head noun, many translators are tempted to carry over this pattern wrongly into their translation. This is especially the case when their language allows exceptions in having the relative clause after the noun. In many languages there are specific reasons for moving the relative to the other side of the head noun. For example, if the clause has another noun of its own and is preceded by another relative clause, it will probably not be clear whether the first clause modifies the head noun or the noun in the second relative. For example, “the table which is big which is covered with a cloth” becomes “which is big cloth covered table”, meaning either “big table” or “big cloth”. Some languages in such cases allow one relative clause to move behind the noun. If this is not possible, the translator will have to change the clauses around or separate them to avoid ambiguity. In languages with such rules, translators are tempted to use the source language order even when there is no reason to have the relative after the noun. Special practice is necessary to get used to recognizing relative clauses and making the change to the regular and natural word order.

Genitives

Genitives or possessives are another type of noun modifier and regularly come before the noun in verb-final languages. Many languages with the verb before the object have the genitive after the head noun in line with greater efficiency in not coming between nouns and verbs. Note “son of man” in English, French, Spanish, Hebrew and Greek. Translators into verb-final languages will quickly develop the skill to reverse the order to “man’s son”.

Adjectives

As with genitives and relatives, adjectives in verb-final languages usually come before the noun they qualify. (Some exceptions occur where verbally derived adjectives follow the pattern of subject-verb.) In spite of English and French which have kept their original pattern with adjectives first, the other source languages have developed adjectives after nouns (note Hebrew, Spanish, and Greek when the article is repeated). Although languages are not as predictable for adjectives as for other

modifiers, it is useful for the translator to be aware of the general expectation when he is comparing languages for his translation.

Subordinate clauses

Verb-final languages normally have dependent clauses before the main clause, keeping the main verb at the end of the sentence. The "source" languages for Bible translation prefer to have the main clause first. However, the order of clauses may be reversed in most languages for emphasis. For example, the sentence, "He studied because he had a test", should normally be translated in verb-final languages, "Because he had a test he studied." Most languages also allow for emphatic reasons to be stated in a separate clause such as, "He studied. The reason is that he had a test." This possibility can lead translators to follow the order of the source language clauses without considering what change in emphasis results. Some translations of John 3.16 have been almost impossible to memorize because they literally keep the clause, "that whoever believes should not perish but have eternal life" at the end instead of at the beginning as is natural in most verb-final languages. A lot of training and practice is necessary for translators in verb-final languages to become skilled in changing the order of subordinate clauses.

In many places in the Bible the source language main clause is in a separate verse, and dependent clauses are in the following verses. In such cases translators need to be especially trained to combine the verses in order to keep the clause order of the verb-final receptor language natural.

Negatives

Negative markers normally develop from two possible sources. The first is from adverbs like "not". Since the normal word order of adverbs is before the verb in both the "source" languages and verb-final languages, these don't present a problem. The other source of negatives is from special verbs which give a negative meaning to other verbs. In this case the negativizing verb is normally the main verb of the sentence. For verb-final languages it will come last, and for others it will normally come before the subordinate verb. The order then is the opposite in the two types of languages. "He **refused** to go" would be "to go he **refused**" in verb-final languages. In time such verbs may become general negative markers without their special meanings. The order, however, will still be with the negative as it was in the original sentence. As an example, Afar, a verb-final language, has both types of negatives, with a clause-final form in subordinate clauses, and a prefixed adverbial form in main clauses.

In languages like English where the word order of verb in second place is strongly established, the negative comes between the helping verb (or modal) and the main verb in the order of "he did **not** go". This rule often causes problems for non-English speakers. Another problem comes with infinitives. Sentences like "he decided not to go" are likely to be

confused with “he didn’t decide to go”. The translator must be careful not to let the word order of his own language confuse him as to which verb in the source language has the negative particle.

Topicalization—passives and clause order

A universal tendency in communication is that topical or assumed information comes first and new information follows. This is seen on the sentence level where the subject is the most topical element and normally comes first. Usually if a direct object of a sentence becomes the topic, it will move to the subject position. In our “source” languages this is often done with the passive voice. However, in verb-final languages the passive voice is not as common, and in some languages it doesn’t exist at all. This means the translator must be especially careful not to try to copy the passive sentence structure of the source language. This can result in unnatural sentences which readers will object to. Moving the previous object into subject position will give it topicality. Other topicalizing markers may exist in your language to also help to convey the same thing that the passive voice does in the source languages.

Topicality can also be noted in other positions than subject. Even a dative which stands before other objects is probably there because it has higher topicality. The ability to move words around is especially obvious in Greek. Many verb-final languages have this same option, so there is real value in studying the original word order, and not relying on the modern language translations which have a restricted word order.

The tendency to have known elements first favors the verb-final language pattern of having dependent clauses first. This is because dependent clauses are normally more topical than main clauses. However, the structure of our “source” languages often has topical dependent clauses following the main clause with its new information. Verb-final language translators will do well to recognize that the biblical source languages do not necessarily present material in the more universal logical order. Clause order and discourse structure should follow topicality patterns in those languages where they are normal. “Because”, “in order to”, “after”, “before”, “while”, and other similar words are clues of high topicality. They should logically precede new information. The translator should not think there is any obligation to copy the clause order of the source. The verb-final language has another way to communicate effectively by putting dependent clauses first.

Positive-negative contrast

One application of the above principle of known or assumed information coming first in the sentence is found in the positive-negative contrast. In languages with the verb near the beginning, the negative often comes before the positive, as in “He didn’t come, but I kept waiting.” Verb-final languages, however, are quite regular in preferring the positive first, “I kept waiting, but he didn’t come.” Givo’n has

discussed the characteristic of negatives under the theme “the presuppositional status of negative speech acts”, noting that a speaker using a negative assumes the hearer is familiar with the positive proposition behind the negative statement (*On Understanding Grammar*, pages 91-142). If the positive and negative are both stated, the logical expectation is to have the presupposed or assumed statement first and the negative new information second. The fact that verb-final languages prefer this order provides another example where practical considerations determine structure. Most languages allow either order. However, the translator should not be trapped into following source language structure just because his language offers the option. The natural sequence in his language may very well represent basic principles of effective communication.

Logical progression in paragraphs

Language typology also raises the question of discourse structure at the paragraph level. The logical sequence for those speaking verb-final languages is to put the generalities and background evidence first, and then give the conclusion. The logic of our biblical source languages usually puts the main point first, and then gives the evidence. How many of our verb-final language translations miss the point by having introductory directives before the evidence? It may sound like the Bible always starts with the conclusion.

For an example look at the paragraphs in 1 Corinthians 14. In verse 1 GNB reads, “Set your hearts on spiritual gifts, especially the gift of proclaiming God’s message.” Verses 2-4 then give the reasons why. In verb-final language logic it would be more natural to have that statement of verse 1 after verse 4. The same can be said for moving the first part of verse 5 after verse 6, and verse 13 after verse 17. Perhaps the readers are too attached to the verse numbering of source language Bibles to make such moves, but if a translation team is seriously interested in effective communication it should consider whether the paragraph seems good logic or not in terms of the way the readers normally present their arguments.

General and specific

The study of language types can also offer some insights on what comes first in ordering, general or specific. In our biblical source languages the normal pattern is specific before general, such as “Bethlehem of Judea”, “Mary Magdalene”, “Judith the daughter of Beerī”, and “Rebekah his mother”. This is to be expected where the whole language set-up puts the main point first and explanations afterwards. Main clauses come before dependent clauses, and head nouns come before relatives and other modifiers. Verb-final languages have just the opposite: qualifiers and explanations before the main point. General material then comes before specific, such as “Judean Bethlehem”, “Magdalene Mary”, “the daughter of Beerī Judith”, and “his mother

Rebekah". Barclay Newman is correct in regard to English when he notes, "As a general rule, there seems to be a higher degree of readability in the order specific-general than in the reverse order." (*The Bible Translator*, 1980, page 410.) In verb-final languages, however, the opposite is true. For example, in the Ethiopian language Amharic, it is common to hear the more precise coming last in introductions such as "Meet the translator Ato Tesfay", or in comparisons such as "about 4 or 3". Number systems are also evidence of this pattern where verb-final languages have compound numbers like fourteen beginning with the ten and ending with the four. Genesis 25.18 offers a longer contrast: (GNB) "in the territory between Havilah and Shur, to the east of Egypt on the way to Assyria"; (Amharic) "east of Egypt, on the road to Assyria, between Havilah and Shur".

Many of these changes may seem insignificant, but they mean a lot in the logical expectation of the reader. Any time the normal expectation is changed, it opens the way to wrong expectations leading the reader away from the intended flow of the message. The loss in naturalness and readability will mean less effective communication.

Gapping

Gapping refers to what happens when two sentences with the same verb are combined and the repeated verb is deleted. This "gap" comes in the second clause in our "source" languages. For example, "John bought paper, and Mary a pen." However, in verb-final languages the gap must come in the first clause since the final verb cannot be deleted. "John paper, and Mary a pen bought." In biblical poetry gapping is one feature of parallelism. The translator must be careful, if he is trying to reproduce parallelism, that he doesn't create impossible sentences as far as his own grammar allows. It is better to have the balance of the lines sacrificed, than to try to have final clauses without final verbs. As one translator noted, "We have had to repeat verbs twice when the Hebrew only has the verb in the first clause."

Indirect to direct speech

Except for Hebrew, which basically has sentences beginning with verbs, the other "source" languages usually have sentences beginning with subjects. Subject-initial languages favor indirect speech as against verb-final languages with direct speech. This follows from a general preference for subordinate clauses in subject-initial languages. Verb-final languages generally prefer stringing basic clauses together on an equal level without the subordination. They therefore leave quotations as direct speech. Subject-initial languages, however, will often change the quote into a subordinate "that" clause. In order to be really natural, translators in verb-final languages need to change indirect speech "that" clauses into direct speech. In many cases the Hebrew has direct speech which has been changed into indirect speech in modern English translations in order to be natural. In these cases the translator needs to

remember that in his language he has to return to the original structure, and in many cases go beyond it in using direct speech.

Coordination by participles and gerunds

Another variation in languages follows from the above mentioned preference for verb-final languages to string clauses together. Again this is similar to Hebrew in that it prefers coordinating conjunctions, rather than subordinating conjunctions like subject-initial languages. This can be seen by looking at the KJV with all the initial “and” conjunctions in the Old Testament. It is also found in the New Testament where the authors were following Semitic style. English and other modern translations have got rid of these conjunctions. However, verb-final languages have another system which is similar to Hebrew style. They will string clauses together with participles or gerunds, rather than put in subordinate relationships or omit any connectors, as is natural in English. Especially in stories or narrative discourse, a series of gerunds may go on for a dozen or more clauses in a typical verb-final language. The rule is, “Don’t be led by the style of the source language. Know what is natural in your own language and restructure into it.”

A mirror image

Translators soon learn to work from opposite ends of the sentence in relating “source” languages to verb-final receiver languages. After the subject of the sentence, practically everything is reversed, and even the position of the noun subject must be switched if the dependent clause subject is the same as in the main clause which now comes at the end. For example, take the sentence, “I brought John, the boy who was hurt, to the doctor of the town quickly in order that he might not die.” In verb-final languages this would normally become, “The who was hurt boy John die not in order that, I him of the town doctor to quickly brought.” Every additional structural complication, such as more subordinate clauses, infinitives and relatives, will result in an additional reversal of order in the clauses.

There is no doubt that all this change in structure makes translating into verb-final languages complicated. Awareness of what the specific changes are on the basis of language type can help the translator to avoid many pitfalls and come up with a more natural translation.