

VSO and Master Yoda

Right, I'll simply assume that you are all Star Wars fans and know Master Yoda.

Ever notice something weird about the way he talks? The creaky voice aside I mean. Considering that he is speaking English (in a galaxy far far away ... how weird is that??) his word order is all up the spout. To put it in linguist-speak, he is using OSV word order. Which makes it sound so weird because English really is a SVO language.

Ok, maybe I should elucidate on this S, V and O stuff first. All languages make utterances that contain information about who is doing what to whom, bluntly speaking. Nit-picking about Agent-Patient languages aside, the WHO bit is commonly called the subject (=S), the ACTION bit is the verb (=V) and the TO WHOM bit is the object (=O). Broadly speaking.

Now take a simple English sentence: Jack is kicking Jill. Who's doing what to whom? Jack is the one who's doing the kicking, so he's the subject (= S). Kicking is the action in question, so that bit is the verb (= V). And Jill is getting muddy footprints on her new Chanel costume, so she is the object (= O) here. So in this sentence the word order is SVO - subject first, then the verb and last the action. If you look at more English sentences, you will see that that is the overall structure of an English sentence. Which brings us back to Master Yoda (we're not worthy, we're not worthy!). Consider his ominous revelation to Luke Skywalker: "You're father he is". Hm ... here we start with the object first, followed by the subject and then by the verb at the end. OSV. While not all his sentences follow this strict structure, a lot of them do and that is what makes him sound so odd.

Now for a bit of linguistic trivia. Assume that languages beg to differ as to their word order. How many different combinations of S, O and V does that give us? Yup, six: SVO, SOV, VSO, VOS, OSV and OVS. By far the most common two are actually SVO & SOV which roughly 75% of the world's languages use, including English. Another 15% or so use VSO and the remaining three make up about 10% of the world's languages. Bet you're dying for some examples, so I'll try not to disappoint you.

SVO English	Jack kicks Jill S V O
Vietnamese	Bích ăn cơm = Bích eats rice Bích eat rice S V O
Hausa (Nigeria)	bā yā cîn nāmā = he doesn't eat meat not he eat meat S V O
SOV Chechen	as Gŭrziini motta bŭŭtsa = I speak Georgian I Georgian language speak S O V
Tongan (Tonga)	kuo u sio he kulī = I have seen the dog PERF I see the dog S V O
Japanese	Ryōko wa terebi o mimasu = Ryōko watches TV Ryōko TOPIC TV DAT watch S O V
VSO Welsh	mae dwy ferch gyda fi = I have two daughters be two girl with I V S O

Cebuano (Phillipines)	adúna siyáy duhá ka anák = she has two children have she two COUNT children V S O
Irish	phóg sé an madra = he kissed the dog PAST-kiss he the dog V S O
VOS Malagasy (Madagascar)	manana akondra aho = I have a banana have banana I V O S
Tzotzil (Mexico)	lá snákan ti vínike yu'un ti xpétule = Peter seated the man PAST seat THEME man AG Peter V O S
OSV Apurinã (Brasil)	anana nota apa = I fetch a pineapple pineapple I fetch O S V
Amharic (Ethiopia)	shay yit'at'all = he's drinking the tea tea he-drinking O S-V
Yanomami (Brasil)	rorõ ya kona taarema = I see a cigarette cigarette I INC see O S V
Master Yoda (Dagoba System)	Your father he is O S V
OVS Hixkaryana (Brasil)	toto yonoye kana = the fish ate the man man ate fish O V S
Xavante (Brasil)	ma wĩrĩ ni = someone killed him PAST him-kill someone O V S

Wonderful, but where does that leave us? Well, as some of you may already have guessed from the above Irish example, Gaelic falls into the select category of VSO languages. And it is quite strict about that - which is lucky for us.

Practically speaking this means that no matter what bits come in between, the verb comes before the subject, and the subject before the object. Let's just look at a few examples:

bidh mi ag ithe ùbhlán a-màireach, a bhalaich!
V S O
chunnaic mo mhàthair cù aig an doras
V S O
bhiodh m' athair ag obair air càraichean nuair a bha mi òg
V S O V2 S2

So why did I say "quite strict"? Because there is a select group of particles that can come before the verb: interrogative particles, past tense markers and negative particles and so on. Here's a list of particles which can commonly come before the verb and a few examples:

Sentence Initial

an/nach	an deach
cha(n)	cha tuig
có, càite, cuine, carson ...	cuine a bhios
ma, nan	nan digeadh tu

Phrase Initial

an/nach	... an deach
có, càite, cuine, carson cuine a bhios
far an, nuair a nuair a bha mi
ma, nan	... nan digeadh tu
gun	... gun robh e

So your average sentence will look like this:

Preverbal Particle(s)	Verb	Subject	Object/etc
cha	tha	mi	mór
an do	bhuail	iad	mi
	bhuail	e	thu?
	bhiodh	e	tinn

am bi mi ag ithe ùbhlán a-màireach, a bhalaich?

V S O

∅ chunnaic mo mhàthair cù aig an doras

V S O

dh'fhàg mo mhàthair cù aig an doras

V S O

cha bhiodh m' athair ag obair air càraichean nuair a bha mi òg

V S O V2 S2

Chunnaic is in the list because there is one of those famous linguistic zeroes (= ∅) in front of it. A linguistic zero is a marker for something that used-to-be-there/would-occupy-this-position-if-it-were-marked. In Old Irish, past tense was quite regularly marked by sticking a particle in front of the verb (don't ask, it was messy). Curiously, one dialect of Irish still preserves this paradigm (it also has a largely synthetic verb structure, ie it uses endings as opposed to individual words):

Munster Irish	Standard Irish	Gaelic
do dhúnas	dhún mé	dhùn mi
do dhúnais	dhún tú	dhùn thu
do dhún sé/sí	dhún sé/sí	dhùn e/i
do dhúnamair	dhún muid	dhùn sinn
do dhúnabhair	dhún sibh	dhùn sibh
do dhúnadar	dhún siad	dhùn iad

That's why **chunnaic** is in the list. The do then got reduced to **d'** before vowels and f in Irish (eg **d'ith mé**) and to **dh'** in Scottish Gaelic (eg **dh'ith mi**). Anyway, it doesn't really matter if you ignore this particular one.

It certainly gets more complicated than that, but for now remembering that Gaelic is a VSO language will do nicely. Watch this space as there is lots more on syntax to come, including a lovely tree diagram even though we're definitely not generativists.