The Emergence and Development **SVO** Patterning Latin and French

Diachronic and Psycholinguistic Perspectives



Brigitte L.M. Bauer

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BRIGITTE L. M. BAUER

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# To my parents, Marius Bauer and Maria-Clara Bauer-Steinhauser, for their support, dependable and unwavering



#### Preface

When Antoine Meillet pointed out the importance of the Romance languages for general linguistics, he emphasized the continuity of linguistic change that can be observed in detail in these languages: the development from Latin to French continues the development from Proto–Indo-European to Latin.

Le principe sur lequel on voudrait attirer l'attention, c'est que le développement roman continue le développement qui conduit de l'indo-européen au latin. Il n'y a pas eu deux développements successifs, mais un développement continu, tantôt lent et tantôt rapide, qui va de l'indo-européen aux parlers romans actuels. (1951:114)

Being an Indo-Europeanist, Meillet was sensitive to developments that go beyond the historical frame of individual languages; he was also attuned to parallel developments in other languages. Well aware of Meillet's observation, I shall attempt in the present study—which contains an analysis of an aspect of Latin syntax and its subsequent development—not to lose sight of the Indo-European perspective, nor of parallel developments in other languages.

Fascinated by language change, a number of years ago I set out to examine linear order in Latin hierarchical structures and its development into French. This turned out to be a rich subject because a solid and ample base of linguistic data made it possible to formulate theoretical conclusions that may affect the essence of language. From the outset I want to emphasize that this is a syntactic analysis. Basic order patterns, which are the

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result of syntactic processes, require sui generis syntactic analysis. The assumption that word order is merely determined by semantic, logical, or pragmatic regularities cannot account for the real nature of the linguistic process involved, nor for the regularity in all phrases or the parallel with morphology.

In this work I discuss the results of my research, presenting evidence for the hypothesis that the order of grammatical structures in Modern French is the result of a long-lasting evolution that psycholinguistic data can account for. The comparison of psycholinguistic and diachronic data has been proposed by the psycholinguist Slobin (1986) and also by Bichakjian (1987, 1988a), who, in a broader and somewhat different perspective, has attempted to explain the important phonological and grammatical changes in Indo-European—among them word order development—by referring to psycholinguistic data, that is, the chronology in language acquisition.

This book represents a translation and revision of my doctoral dissertation, *Du latin au français: le passage d'une langue SOV à une langue SVO*, which I submitted to the University of Nijmegen (the Netherlands) in March 1992. The *mores* at the University of Nijmegen do not allow the *promovendus* or the *promovenda* to thank his or her dissertation advisor. Consequently this is the first occasion I have to express my thanks to my dissertation advisor, Bernard Bichakjian (University of Nijmegen) for his help and his inspired teaching, which always focused on similarity and patterns in language change.

I also wish to thank the staff of the classics department at the University of Nijmegen, who often permitted me to attend courses on different variants of Latin despite my status as a student of French linguistics.

Moreover, I am indebted to the Faculty of Arts at the University of Nijmegen and the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). Their material support allowed me to participate in international conferences and to spend part of the summer of 1990 at the University of Texas at Austin to attend the NEH Summer Institute devoted to "Perspectives on the Indo-European World," organized by Professor Edgar Polomé, who made my participation possible and to whom I am most grateful. I also want to thank the other professors of linguistics at this institute: W. P. Lehmann (University of Texas at Austin), Thomas Gamkrelidze (University of Tbilisi, Georgia), Jaan Puhvel (University of California at Los Angeles), Karl Horst Schmidt (University of Bonn), and Werner Winter (University of Kiel). I am indebted to these scholars for the interest they showed in my research, for the extremely useful advise they gave me, and for numerous bibliographical references.

I also wish to express my thanks to those with whom I had stimulating discussions and who sent me offprints or copies of articles related to the subject of my research: Melissa Bowerman (Max Planck Institut für Psycholinguistik, Nijmegen), Robert Coleman (University of Cambridge), Robert de Dardel (University of Groningen), Charles Elerick (University

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Finally, I would not have been able to carry out the translation nor the revision of my dissertation without the help of Professor W. P. Lehmann, at whose institute I spent seven months in 1992 to start a new research project, and who kindly offered to read the English version and to comment on the text. His suggestions, based on his exceptionally broad linguistic knowledge and inspired by the concept of the systemic organization of language, have been extremely useful. Dr. Julie Bellquist kindly found the time to read the manuscript and to eliminate infelicities. The kind help of these linguists was both encouraging and fruitful, greatly contributing to the results of my research. The shortcomings of this work are, of course, mine alone.

During my stay in Austin, I came to know the staff of the Linguistics Research Center at the University of Texas, who apply and develop phrase structure analyses for advanced machine translation. The friendly and professional atmosphere at the institute had a stimulating effect on my work. Moreover, the Linguistics Research Center generously allowed me to use their computers and other facilities, for which I am very grateful.

I am also indebted to the Niels Stensen Stichting, whose grant allowed me to spend 1992–93 abroad to do research at the University of Texas at Austin and at Cambridge University.

While preparing this manuscript for publication, I received the kind help of Mr Richard Mendez (University of Texas at Austin), whose knowledge of American and European word-processing systems proved crucial. I am also much indebted to the anonymous readers for Oxford University Press and to senior editor Cynthia Read, whose suggestions, comments, and advice have been extremely valuable. Finally, I am grateful to the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences for accepting me as one of its research fellows, which enables me to continue my research in diachronic Indo-European syntax.

My dissertation was dedicated to my parents. Since they have always shown great interest in my work and given me the support I needed, I see no reason to alter my dedication.



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## The Emergence and Development of SVO Patterning in Latin and French



### 1

#### Introduction

Many have deplored the loss of Latin, which they considered the epitome of a concise, systematic, and even elegant language. In the past, poets as well as linguists have identified the linguistic system of Latin with the civilization it carried: the language of Rome reflected, it was thought, the elegance and refinement of its civilization. These epithets did not apply, of course, to modern times, nor to their languages. Even in recent history we find examples of the prestige attributed to inflected languages. For Schleicher, for instance, according to whom language was to be considered a living organism, Latin as well as the *Ursprache* reflected maturity in its full bloom, whereas the Romance development was only the decay and decomposition of a living organism (1873; Robins 1979:181 et seq.). And even in this century Marr, the official linguist of the former Soviet Union, classified the inflected languages as being the most evolved; isolating languages on the other hand were considered primitive and therefore occupied a low place in the linguistic hierarchy. The political reasons were clear as well as the motives that pushed the Soviets to change their official linguistic judgment when the communists came to power in China: Chinese is an isolating language (see Lehmann 1993:38).

The aim of the present study is not to bewail the loss of Latin nor to praise Russian inflection. Its aim is to analyze and identify the nature of the development the structures of Latin underwent and to understand the advantage of the new structural organization. Therefore, this study has two parts: first I will examine in detail the ordering of the Latin grammatical sequences and the reorganization they underwent. Then, I will attempt

to show that the diachronic development can be related to findings in language acquisition. The comparison of diachronic and psycholinguistic data will thus enable us to explain a linguistic phenomenon the importance and extent of which have often passed unnoticed: the change, in the development from Latin to French, of the linear order in syntactic as well as morphological structures.

As a first step I will prove that the morphological and syntactic structures shifted from one type of linear organization—characteristic of the ancient language—to another: in the Latin structures the complement (or modifier) generally preceded its head and was therefore left branched, whereas in Modern French the order is the reverse: the complement follows; it is right branched. See for instance,

where the verbal object precedes the head of the Latin phrase but follows it in the French example; or

$$\begin{array}{cccc} [[\mathit{can}] & -\mathit{ibus}] & \to & [\mathit{aux} & [\mathit{chiens}]] \\ 2 & 1 & \to & 1 & 2 \\ \text{'to the dogs'} & & & \end{array}$$

where the postposed head, the grammatical marker, of the Latin word has been replaced with a preposed adposition in French.

Diachronic analysis of grammatical structures will reveal that this reorganization did not occur in all the grammatical structures at the same time, but that there is a linear development. And even if one observes occasional retrograde tendencies, the other Indo-European languages—independently -have undergone the same development (see Lehmann [1974], who observes the shift from (S)OV to (S)VO; see also Bichakjian 1987, 1988a). The universal character of the shift implies that it cannot be attributed to external or ad hoc factors. It is in child language that I hope to find the broader explanatory frame that this type of change requires, relating the regularity of diachronic change to the patterns in language acquisition. The comparison of the rhythms of acquisition of both types of branching may show that the modern, right-branching structures present important advantages over their left-branching counterparts. These advantages provide objective criteria with which to judge the complexity of the structures and permit us to understand or even to account for the diachronic shift toward right branching.

Earlier, comparison of diachronic and psycholinguistic data has been proposed by Andersen (1980) and, more recently, by Slobin (1986), according to whom there is a correlation between linguistic features that are stable over time and the ease of their acquisition (see chapter 6 in the present study). In an evolutionary, hence dynamic, perspective Bichakjian also correlates diachronic and psycholinguistic data, but he assumes a

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reverse parallel between the diachronic development of language and the order in the acquisition of grammatical structures, consequently claiming that the Indo-European languages are evolving "in the direction of earlier acquired speech sounds and grammatical features . . .: [they] have evolved or are evolving by eliminating late-acquired features and by replacing them with earlier acquired ones" (1988a:12-13). Only if this parallel can be proven in phonology, morphology, and syntax—but only then—might one try to extrapolate a principle and explain it (for example, Bichakjian [1988a] tries to correlate linguistic development and biological evolution). Yet the biological correlation implies a universality in language change that can only be assumed on the basis of a much larger and more varied corpus of language data than Bichakjian has presented. Alternatively, in a more direct linguistic perspective and in line with the idea that synchronic language patterns are systemic, it is legitimate to argue that the various parallel linguistic changes—in morphology, syntax, and lexicon, for example —are integrated in the comprehensive shift from one type of language to another (see Klimov 1986; Lehmann 1990). Once this pervasive change has been demonstrated, one can set out, in a subsequent stage, to account for it.

In this preliminary chapter I briefly discuss the earlier descriptions and explanations of the evolution of word order in French. Generally the extent of the change has not been perceived in these studies nor has the diachronic change been related to the chronology of language acquisition.

#### 1.1 Earlier Studies of Word Order

Traditionally diachronic studies of French have focused on the disappearance of nominal inflection, the emergence of fixed word order, and the shift from synthetic to analytic forms. Some scholars have related the first two changes, claiming that the disappearance of cases due to phonetic erosion compelled the emerging of fixed word order. This hypothesis takes into consideration only changes that occurred in nominal inflection. Therefore, in order to summarize the entire linguistic development that took place from Latin to French, a second pervasive change had to be postulated: the replacement of synthetic with analytic forms (for instance, Latin laudaveram, which was replaced by French j'avais loué). Yet the observation as such does not integrate the change into a broader frame; consequently, the modifications that took place in the verbal paradigm remain an isolated phenomenon. This explains why the development from Latin to French is generally summarized by assuming two major changes: the creation of fixed word order and the replacement of synthetic by analytic forms.

#### 1.1.1 The Erosion Hypothesis

If one tries to explain the development of word order by referring to phonetic erosion, one still has to account for this erosion, that is, the disappearance of case endings. (See Bichakjian [1987:88], who correctly uses this argument against the hypothesis proposed by Vennemann; see also section 1.1.2.) The process of erosion is all the more difficult to understand because case endings, according to this same hypothesis, are supposed to play a prominent role in the sentence.

Finally, the hypothesis of the appearance of fixed word order presupposes an indiscriminately free word order in Latin. This presupposition ignores the testimonies of the period and the corroborating data which prove that word order in Latin was not as free as it is often claimed to be. Quintilian, for instance, recommends that the verb be placed at the end of the clause: "verbo sensum cludere multo . . . optimo est" (9.4.26). This admonition does not reflect an obsolete cause as does, for instance, the *Appendix Probi*; rather, it shows a situation where word order was certainly freer than in Modern French, but where there was a preferred order, in spite of the possibilities offered by a full-fledged inflectional system. In Modern Russian one observes the same situation: notwithstanding the variety that case endings allow, there is a dominating word order that is unmarked (see Jakobson 1963:212). In the introduction to his monumental work, Marouzeau correctly argues that Latin had no fixed word order, but that two different word orders were never synonymous:

L'ordre des mots en latin est libre, il n'est pas indifférent. Libre, en ce sens que, sauf exception, il n'y a pas pour chaque terme de la phrase une place attitrée, obligatoire. Mais non pas indifférent, parce qu'en general deux ordres possibles ne sont pas synonymes. (1922:1)

Without using the terms "marked" and "unmarked," which were not yet common at that time, Marouzeau indeed distinguishes between the normal and the exceptional, or motivated, order in the Latin structures (1922, 1938, 1949, 1953).

The notion of markedness is fundamental to the study of word order because it accounts for the fact that the structures of a language display an unmarked order, that is, the order which the speaker uses without any particular purpose or objective, or in nonspecific contexts. The marked order, on the other hand, is related to specific syntactic and stylistic contexts (interrogative phrases, subordinate clauses, etc.).

Analysis of syntactic phrases indeed proves that Latin had an unmarked word order for each sequence; as will be shown in chapters 3 through 5, the elements of each phrase were ordered in earliest times in Latin or before according to the principles of an SOV language. Exceptions to the normal order can be explained by stylistic and syntactic reasons: they present the marked order. Romance languages, on the other hand, feature SVO structures (see Hawkins 1983:320–42; Harris 1978:7). Accordingly, the observation made by Ewert and quoted by Price is not totally adequate because it excludes the existence of an unmarked word order: "[T]he fundamental change in word order from Latin to Modern French . . . consists in its rise as a syntactic device and its decline as a stylistic device" (Ewert 1943, quoted in Price 1971:259).

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Even if word order in French is more strict than it was in Latin, the fundamental change in the development from Latin to French is not the emergence of fixed word order but the shift from an SOV to an SVO language (see also Harris 1978:5–7). This change is part of a comprehensive evolution, which affects not only syntax but also morphology. Since the shift from an SOV to an SVO order is indeed the major change in the development from Latin to French, the erosion hypothesis is refuted as the explanation of the emergence of word order.

#### 1.1.2 Erosion as the Cause of the Shift from SOV to SVO

In the 1970s Vennemann took up the erosion hypothesis again, arguing that it can explain the shift from SOV to SVO:

A language with S-O morphology tends to be XV; as reductive phonological change weakens the S-O morphology, and does not develop some substitute S-O morphology, the language becomes a VX language. Since in VX languages order is a major grammatical marker, the order becomes increasingly rigid. (1974:359)

According to Vennemann's hypothesis, it is the intermediary position of the verb in an SVO, hence noninflectional language, that distinguishes the subject and the object. This observation might be interesting if one compares only SOV and SVO ordering. But in a VSO language one finds exactly the same concentration of nouns and in the same alignment—SO—even if there are no case endings used to avoid grammatical confusion. Consequently, the alleged distinctive function of the intermediary verb is not convincing.

Vennemann's hypothesis has been criticized in extenso by Sasse (1977) and, more recently, by Bichakjian (1987), who argues that structural changes generally occur independently of morphological erosion, and that they are not caused by this process. Indeed, several Indo-European and non–Indo-European languages "have developed an SVO order while having quite clear case markers" (Bichakjian 1987:89). Moreover, research by Koch (1974) and Miller (1975) has shown that in Indo-European SVO order chronologically precedes the loss of cases (see Bichakjian [1987:89], who quotes Sasse [1977]).

These considerations are substantiated by data from Old French and by synchronic typological evidence. The existence of SVO languages with a case system and, inversely, the occurrence of SOV languages without nominal inflection (see Sasse 1977) imply that there is no necessary causal relation between the loss of cases and the emergence of SVO order. Data from Old French corroborate this conclusion.

In Old French the unmarked order was SVO, although the only two cases that still existed to a certain extent were the most important ones in this respect, namely, the nominative and the accusative (see Foulet 1923:36, 257). It is true, of course, that Old French did allow other word orders in specific contexts (see section 4.5) and that the case system

showed gaps. Nominal inflection was defective because it was limited to masculine nouns, and in this subcategory there were numerous indeclinables (for instance, proper names; see Woledge 1974:80-81). Moreover, declension no longer had the same effect everywhere (Woledge 1974:94; see also Pope [1956:310 et seq.], who gives more geographical details). The status or actual functioning of the case system in Old French and also the various degrees of functioning in different parts of the territory are definitely a matter of discussion. (For the defective use of case in manuscripts, see Cerquiglini et al. [1976]; for the use of cases as a literary means, see Cerquiglini [1983]; see also Fleischmann 1990a, 1990b). Yet independently of the results of this discussion, evidence from Old French shows that the accusative and nominative were the cases that survived longest; one might therefore assume a period of coexistence of case marking and the emerging SVO word order. Consequently the disappearance of nominal inflection cannot have been the ultimate cause of the shift toward SVO. Evidence from Modern Russian corroborates this conclusion: the case system is still well established although the unmarked word order is already SVO (see Jakobson 1963).

There is a second consideration on which Vennemann (1974) has based his hypothesis and which has often gone unnoticed. The shift from SOV to SVO is attributed to the ambiguity caused by the topicalization of the object. In a language with SVO word order the topicalization of the object would give OSV, in an SOV language it would give OSV, and in a VSO language it would give OVS. Accordingly, only in an SOV language does the distribution of verb versus noun phrases remain unchanged by the process of topicalization: N[oun]P[hrase] NP V[erb] remains NP NP V. As long as there are case endings, Vennemann assumes, the distribution of the grammatical functions is clear and the speakers know they have to do with a marked or unmarked order. Yet, once the noun declensions have eroded, the sentence is ambiguous and the intermediary position of the verb is needed to distinguish the subject and the object and will thus create a sequence—TVX—which deviates from the normal SOV order. With time, Vennemann argues, the sequence TVX will become the unmarked order with the subject as topic (that is, if it is a nominative language), which will give SVO. Once this order is established, typological consistency is supposed to trigger the total reorganization of the language according to SVO typology, because "much of the word order history of a language is a development toward consistency within its type" (Vennemann 1974:353). This hypothesis implies ipso facto that the removal of the verb marks the beginning of a new typology. Diachronic Italic and Romance data, however, refute this chronology (see chapters 3 through 5) and therefore also the explanation proposed by Vennemann.

Moreover, Vennemann's hypothesis is based on the assumption, which he does not discuss, that SXV, SVX, and VSX automatically have XSV, XSV, and XVS as their marked variants. It is legitimate to ask whether topicalization is the only means for emphasizing the direct object. One

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would expect another strategy, more in accordance with the ordering principles of the language under consideration, rather than a construction that—according to this same hypothesis—will not fail to reorganize all the structures of the language. If typological consistency—in casu SOV—is the moving force behind word order change, it would be likely to restrain the movement toward typologically different structures, the more so since marked, hence exceptional sentences are involved. Therefore, other strategies would seem more appropriate; cf., for instance, Dutch, which is a noninflectional language and displays SVO in main clauses but SOV in subordinate ones. The emphasizing of the object by topicalization creates the sequence OVS and not OSV, as Vennemann claimed (1974:355). Compare

and

As in the case of SOV discussed by Vennemann, the marked variant has the same ordering of phrases (NP V NP) as the unmarked sequence. Yet Dutch, far from changing the structure of its clause, uses another means: it either changes the prosodics of the sentence or uses a passive or periphrastic structure.

## 1.1.3 The Emergence of Fixed Word Order and the Loss of Cases

Whereas Vennemann tried to explain the emergence of SVO order by claiming the importance of the intermediary verb, other linguists, among them the well-known Romanist scholar Edouard Bourciez, have proposed a different chronology between the disappearance of cases and the rise of word order. Despite greater freedom, Latin had, according to Bourciez, a preferred word order (1956:13), and the disappearance of case endings was triggered by the reorganization of word order (1956:22). After this structural reorganization, case distinctions were no longer needed and nominal inflection gradually disappeared: hence, according to Bourciez, the loss of inflection was closely related to changes in syntax (1956:22).

Like the linguists who advocate the erosion hypothesis, Bourciez attempts to reconstruct a linguistic phenomenon, but the very first change which dragged along the rest remains to be explained. Although the chronology proposed by Bourciez corresponds better to linguistic reality, the reason why there was a change in word order remains to be found. Moreover, as for phonetic erosion, only the disappearance of the grammatical