

Grammarian's Corner

Word Order

It is helpful in so many ways to be able to read the books of the Scriptures in the original languages, both the Old and New Testaments alike. This is the first in a continuing series (it is hoped) of articles focusing upon the Greek of the NT, to help pastors, students, and able laypeople see the value of continuing their study of the canonical books of the NT in their original languages and to increase their facility in Koine Greek. This article will focus upon the issue of word order.

Native speakers of English tend not to think often of the matter of word order, oddly enough because it is so important to us. If given word orders are not followed, our sentences do not make sense. Thus, under almost all circumstances (poetry is the main exception), we follow a Subject-Verb-Object (=S-V-O) word order in sentences/clauses (e.g., “*John saw the brown house beside the bridge*”); we keep words together whose thoughts go together (e.g., “*John saw the brown house beside the bridge*”), and we put adjectival modifiers in front of the words they modify (e.g., “*John saw the brown house beside the bridge*”), to detail perhaps the three most important factors. We tend to be bound to such orders because our language is not highly inflected, i.e., it does not use different endings to indicate function in a sentence but the order of the various words.¹

Greek is similar to English in many ways, with one major exception: sentence/clause word order is much more flexible (possible, of course, because it is an inflected language).² S-V-O word order is very common in Greek, but it is by no means as dominant as it is in contemporary English. To take one example, Plato, in his description of the conversation between Socrates and his friends concerning final plans relative to the former's death in the *Phaedo* (115 C,D),³ uses nine finite verbs with objects; seven employ the order V-O, two use O-V. Chrys Caragounis, in his massive and informative new book on the Greek of the NT,⁴ notes that some traditional grammarians consider S-V-O word order to be normal and that others consider S-O-V order to fulfill that role, but he himself is of the opinion

¹ Thus, words in the following order: “Peter saw Paul” indicate that “Peter” is the doer of the action and “Paul” is the object/receiver. Reverse the order (“Paul saw Peter”) and you reverse the thought. The chief exception is personal pronouns. When we use these, inflection is possible. Thus, “he” is used for subjects and “him” for objects, allowing sentences such as “Him he saw” (“Paul Peter saw” is not clear).

² In Greek, unlike English, Πέτρος εἶδε Παῦλον and Παῦλον εἶδε Πέτρος say substantially the same thing (“Peter saw Paul”). One must, in effect, reverse the endings to reverse the thought: Παῦλος εἶδε Πέτρον / Πέτρον εἶδε Παῦλος. But see below for the semantics of the “reverse” word order.

³ *Platonis Opera*, E. A. Duke, et al., eds., vol. 1, Oxford: University Press, 1995.

⁴ *The Development of Greek and the New Testament*, Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2004.

that no single order can be considered “normal”!⁵ I am not sure that I would go as far as Caragounis in terms of flexibility, because it does actually seem as if a general S-V-O word order can be detected in Greek prose (e.g., in Plato, above).⁶ Furthermore, while there are many exceptions to this order for various reasons,⁷ it is noticeable that frequently authors employ “exceptional” word order to convey emphasis. In the section of Plato referenced above, Socrates, incredulous that Crito is concerned about what to do with his body after his death (because he is unaware that the corpse is not the “real Socrates”), declares: καὶ ἐρωτᾷ δὴ πῶς με θάπτῃ. This can be rendered: “And he asks, indeed, how he shall actually bury⁸ me!” He then goes on to observe: ἐγὼ Πάλαι πολλὸν λόγον πεποίημαι = “I have already some time ago produced a lengthy discourse” about the fact that when I drink the potion I will no longer remain with you.... In the NT, we see a similar construction in Paul’s famous 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians, verses 1 and 2. Note the phrases ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω in verse one and toward the end of verse two = “...but (if) I don’t actually have love....” (See also the order with the infinitive in the ὥστε clause of v. 2: ὅρη μεθιστάναι = “...so as actually to move mountains....”) A striking example of such exceptional word order occurs in Acts 19, in Paul’s interaction with the disciples of John the Baptist. In verse 4, Luke/Paul takes the daring step, not only of moving εἰς τὸν ἐρχόμενον μετ’ αὐτόν, the object⁹ of the πιστεῦσασιν, to a position in front of it, but also and especially of removing it from its clause altogether and placing it before the subordinating conjunction ἵνα! This has the effect of bolding, highlighting, and italicizing the phrase all at the same time: “John baptized ...saying that they believe in the one coming after him—i.e., not in himself—that is, in Jesus.” One must keep one’s eyes out for “unusual” word order, as we have been describing it, because, generally speaking, the translations do not in any way reflect the emphasis that it conveys. (See also 1 Thessalonians 3:12, and in the Gospel of Mark 3:27b, 6:8 [ἵνα clause], 8:19-20a, 13:6b. [The phenomenon also oc-

⁵ Caragounis, 405-406.

⁶ It is important to make this genre point, because Greek poetry has, and must have, extreme flexibility, since it is metric in structure. Thus, in poetry, words are ordered, not principally for syntactical reason, but because of the requirements of scansion (the ordering of long and short syllables). When poetry—which comprises much of Greek literary stock—is brought into consideration, Caragounis is undoubtedly correct in his assessment of word order.

⁷ Of no small consideration for Greek writers were acoustic and stylistic features, i.e., how words sounded together and the prose meter of the words. See the revealing discussion in Caragounis, 406-433.

⁸ Note the use of the subjunctive mood, reflecting the deliberative subjunctive of the direct statement, employing the “present,” i.e., focus on connection stem to give emphasis.

⁹ While a prepositional phrase is used with πιστεύω in this construction, it behaves as if it were a simple object. The preposition εἰς is to be construed as virtually part of the verbal action (=“believe in”) rather than locative, showing in which direction one places one’s faith.

curs in phrases, e.g., θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον in Ephesians 2:8 and τοῦ Ἀβραὰμ σπέρμα in Galatians 3:29]).

One exception to what we have presented is noteworthy. Semitic word order in prose tends not to parallel that of Greek. In Hebrew and Aramaic, V-S-O word order is more common than S-V-O. Thus, verbs will tend to begin sentences/clauses which have come under Semitic influence, even though they are written in Greek. See, e.g., Mark 1:28: καὶ ἐξῆλθεν ἡ ἀκοὴ αὐτοῦ εὐθὺς πανταχοῦ.... (also Mark 1:23, 1:25, 3:20, 12:18, 13:12). In these cases, one cannot conclude that emphasis is being placed upon either the verb or the subject. Rather, the word order is evidence that a Semitic speaker (e.g., Mark 13:12) or a Semitic Vorlage (Mark 1:23-28) is at work within or behind the text.

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