VSO AND SVO ORDER IN WELSH AND BRETON

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The Celtic languages are often adduced as an example of the rare word order type verb-subject-object or VSO. This order is estimated by Keenan (1976 : 322) to be the deominant surface word order of only five to ten percent of the languages of the world.[1]

VSO, though clearly distinct from the frequently occurring order subject--verb-object or SVO, does share some syntactic features with SVO, e.g. placement of adjectives, genitives and relative clauses after the noun, and use of prepositions rather than postpositions. Lehmann distinguishes only OV and VO languages, and thus considers VSO and SVO more alike than different. Synchronic variation between the two orders is expressed in Greenberg's universal no. 6, "All languages with dominant VSO order have SVO as an alternative or as the only alternative basic word order" (Greenberg 1966 : 79).

Diachronic drift between VSO and SVO is observed in Welsh and Breton. The present paper describes this drift and offers explanation for the phenomenon based on universal tendencies of information structure and on the particular language contact situations of Welsh and Breton.

The documented history of Welsh begins in the sixth century A. D. This Early Welsh, as well as Old Welsh (eighth century) are attested rather poorly, but those texts which we do have show consistent VSO order. Middle Welsh prose of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries rarely uses VSO order; both emphatic and unemphatic declarative sentences are usually SVO. Modern literary Welsh is VSO; there are some SVO tendencies, however.

Old Breton is mainly attested in glosses which tell us little about word order. According to Hsieh (1977 : 101) it was a free word order (FWO) language

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[1] The present paper considers dominant surface word order only and makes no claims about underlying word order in the sense of transformational-generative grammar.

with VSO as the preferred variant. VSO order has been unusual in Breton since the Middle Breton period (twelfth century through sixteenth century). Modern spoken Breton is SVO; however, some writers now prefer a VSO style known as *brezhoneg chimik* or "Chemical Breton" (Varin 1979).

Considering that their Indo European ancestor was probably an SOV language, it is curious that the Celtic languages developed the quite different order VSO at an early date. This is however well documented by Old Irish. There may have been an intermediate SVO stage, if the scant Gaulish or Continental Celtic evidence is any indication of what the word order of un-attested Insular Celtic was. Wagner (1959) posits a substratum influence on Celtic by Berber VSO languages. Hsieh, as mentioned, thinks that VSO was a preferred order which was eventually grammaticized. In any case, Celtic has exploited a rare option among word order types.

SVO languages may develop out of SOV (e.g. modern Germanic and Romance languages) or VSO (e.g. Breton's shift away from VSO, which is known in Breton grammar as *l'ordre celtique* or "Celtic order" and in Welsh grammar as "normal order".

Some Welsh constructions have always been subject-initial. This is the required order with emphatic reduplicated subject pronouns: modern Welsh

(1) Ninnau oedd yn cwyno   "*We* were complaining". (ptc=
     we   was ptc complain   particle)

The corresponding unemphatic sentence is

(2) Roeddwn ni yn cwyno.   "We were complaining".
     ptc-were we ptc complain

Subject-verb agreement is regularly suspended in Welsh emphatic constructions; compare Middle Welsh

(3) Fi a welais hwn   "I saw this" and
     I ptc saw-1 sg. this
(4) Fi a welodd hwn "I saw this".
     I ptc saw-3 sg this

Other Welsh constructions with obligatory SV order are superlatives: Modern Welsh

(5) Fi ydy'r gorau   "I am the best (one)" and
     I is the best
(6) Fi sy yma   "I am here"   with a special suppletive verb known
     I who-is here

as the relative copula. These constructions also show suspension of subject-verb agreement.

Researchers do not agree on the most natural word order for Welsh. Wagner notes considerable SVO tendencies in modern spoken Welsh, which he considers typologically similar to the Middle Welsh prose of the epic *Mabinogi*. VSO is seen as an artificial literary rule in modern Welsh. Mac Cana (1973) provides the opposite viewpoint; he sees SVO order in Middle Welsh as an artificial construct of which modern Welsh makes little use either in writing or in speech. Thomas (1973) notes however a tendency in her own dialect of Welsh to use SVO order when the subject is a personal pronoun and VSO when the subject is a noun. Thomas is a native speaker from Southeast Glamorgan, a part of Wales very close to the English border. The impact of English on Welsh will be discussed in detail below.

There is little question that the dominant word order in Modern Breton is SVO. Anderson and Chung (1977:13) perhaps give too much creedence to VSO, which they describe as "grammatical but stylistically odd". Mac Cana considers noun-initial order the norm for Modern Breton. Dressler agrees, noting that not even a question can begin with a verb in Breton. He sees this restriction as the continuation of an Indo European discourse rule which reserved verb-initial order for highly marked structures (Dressler 1969).

It is fruitful to consider the general information structure of communication as a possible explanatory factor in word order change. The general tendency to place old, definite information before new, indefinite information was noted in the nineteenth century by Weil in his comparison of the word orders of ancient and modern languages. This distinction was particularly developed by Mathesius and other Prague School linguists who have worked with Functional Sentence Perspective.

This very important communicative tendency, which is also known as the Topic/Comment distinction, is particularly exploited in Breton. Any constituent may be topicalized; this is achieved by placing the constituent in sentence-initial position. The following examples illustrate topicalization of the subject, object and a locative prepositional phrase respectively (examples from Anderson 1981):

(7) Perig a zo o klask e vreur er c'hoad   "Peter is looking for his
     Peter ptc is at look- his br. in-the woods brother in the woods".

(8) E vreur a zo Perig o klask er c'hoad   "Peter is looking for his
     his br. ptc is P. at look- in-the woods brother in the woods".

(9) Er c'hoad emañ Perig a klask e vreur   "It is in the woods that Peter
     in-the woods is Peter at look- his br. for is looking for his brother".

The first example, with topicalization of the subject, is not emphatic or contrastive. It is an example of the unmarked sentence type in Breton.

Both subjects (a syntactic category) and topics (a pragmatic notion) typically, although not necessarily, convey old information. Old information typically occupies sentence-initial position.

Topicalization of the subject is a stylistic option in VSO. If it becomes grammaticized, a VSO language can be said to have shifted to SVO. This has happened in Breton, although only in main clauses. Subordinate clause order is subordinating conjunction-verb-subject:

(10) Ma veze Yann skuizh...   "If John is tired" (example from Anderson
     if   were John tired   1981)

The reduced role of topicalization in subordinate clauses is due to the occupation of the clause-initial position by a subordinating constituent. This prevents placement of topical material in clause-initial position, and may shed some light on the slowness of word order change in subordinate clauses.[2]

The rarity of VSO order can be explained by its contradiction of the general communicative tendency noted. A noun phrase can be old, definite information. The category of definiteness does not generally apply to verbs, which are not good candidates for topic status.[3]

Verb-initial order also causes perceptual difficulties, particularly if there is no nominal case system. Subjects and objects are formally similar; both are noun phrases. In SVO languages, they are clearly separated by the verb. In SOV languages, there is no such separation, but the typical presence of a suffixal case system reduces the formal similarity. Modern Irish Gaelic, a VSO Celtic language, also has a suffixal case systems. The predominance of VSO in modern Welsh, which has no system, seems to contradict universal information structure.

We suggest that a look at a very productive construction in modern Welsh may reconcile the structure of this language to that which one expects.

The verbal system of modern spoken Welsh is characterized by a large number of periphrastic tenses. There are also a few synthetic tenses, especially the preterite and the future, but even these are beginning to disappear in some dialects. Whereas a South Walian speaker uses the synthetic preterite

(11) Fe aeth e "he went",
     ptc went he

in North Walian the form is

(12) Ddaru e fynd "he went".   (North Walian o=South Walian e).
     happened him go

Ddaru is one of several auxiliaries which combine with non-finite verbal nouns[4] to form periphrastic tenses. Others are *guneud* "do" and particularly *bod* "be". A typical sentence is

(13) Mae fy ffrind yn cysgu   "My friend is sleeping".
     is my friend ptc sleep

The sentence-initial verb, which has certain *syntactic* qualities of a verb (tense and person), but little semantic weight, is complemented by a non-finite form which carries *semantic* information and is placed after the subject. Aspect is expressed by the particles *yn* (imperfective; see examples 1 and 13 above) and *wedi* (perfective):

(14) Mae e wedi cysgu   "He has slept".[5]
     is he after sleeping

There is not room in the present paper to explore the interesting question of possible main-verb status for auxiliaries (see Ross 1969). We will leave the question unanswered, but note that Welsh is syntactically a VSO language, but semantically often SVO.

There is a language-external factor which must be considered for both Welsh and Breton. Both languages are in constant contact with a national prestige language. Welsh speakers are almost invariably bilingual with English, as are Breton speakers with French. Anwyl (1899:164) notes "the fascinating phenomenon of adjustment of the categories of one language to those of another when the linguistic consciousness is of necessity bilingual".

The ultimate outcome of language contact between a national prestige language and a minority language is the death of the latter. Language death certainly has occurred when all speakers of a language have died. It may actually occur at an earlier point. Dressler points out that a language represented only by "semi-speakers", i. e. those who no longer use their minority language fluently or comfortably, is not really alive.

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[2] This may be observed in German, which has SVO order and productive topicalization (OVS) in main clauses, but the SOV order of Proto-Germanic in subordinate clauses.

[3] The suppletive forms of Welsh *bod* "be" do show some sensitivity to the definiteness of their nominal subject. For example, in questions, *oes* is used with indefinite subjects, *ydy* with definite subjects: *Oes car yma?* "Is there a car here?", but *Ydy'r car yma?* "is the car here?".

[4] The verbal noun is a particularly Celtic phenomenon. Its nominal character is clear in Irish Gaelic, where nominal case is always expressed; the object of the verbal noun must be in the genitive. It cannot be in the accusative. In Welsh, case is distinguished only in the pronoun system. Compare *Fe welais i hi* "I saw her"
                              ptc saw I her
with *Mae'r dyn yn ei gweld hi* "The man sees her".

[5] Some dialects of English used by speakers from Celtic countries show a substratum influence; for "he has slept" Scottish speakers may use rather "he is after sleeping".

The Celtic languages have all been affected by language death. Two languages, Cornish[6] and Manx, have become extinct in modern times. The others, Scottish Gaelic (the subject of a recent book entitled *Language Death*, Dorian (1981)), Irish Gaelic, Welsh and Breton, all exhibit features of language death (or language decay, as Dressler terms the process leading to ultimate language death.

Welsh was discouraged by a 1536 law, the Act of Union, which assigned official status to English only. The 1967 Welsh Language Act has restored some vitality to Welsh, the "healthiest" Celtic language. Attempts to save and revive a language are a phenomenon associated with language death. Breton is being discouraged by the French government to a greater extent than its speakers are able to defend it. There is, for example, no Breton-language radio or television, while the Welsh language is being spread by these media.

Welsh and Breton exhibit massive lexical borrowing from their respective prestige languages. Borrowing happens in various lexical categories: nouns: Welsh *car, beic, banc* (English car, bike, bank), the quantifier *lot* (English *a lot, lots*) and verbs: *licio, smocio* (English like, smoke) and an on-the-spot creation by a bilingual speaker: *areific* (English arrive) for Welsh *cyrraedd*. The English-based verbal nouns have generalized an *-io* ending; Welsh verbal nouns otherwise show little or no suffixal regularity, e. g. *rhedeg* "run", *canu* "sing", *gofyn* "ask".

We look to Breton for examples of syntactic borrowing. As syntax is notoriously slow to change, the fact of such borrowing in Breton is a testimony to its advanced stage of decay. Particularly striking is the development of a lexical and auxiliary verb *endevout* "have" in Breton. This is a clear French influence. The Celtic languages otherwise lack a verb meaning "have, possess" and express possession by constructions such as Welsh.

(15) Mae car gan fy ffrind   "My friend has a car".
     is   car with my friend

The loss of the responsive or answer form (German *Antwortform*) is another indication of language death in Breton. Celtic languages generally lack words for "yes" and "no". Instead they have grammaticized a repetition of the verb used in the question. A simple example is Welsh.

(16) Oedd dy dad yn hapus?   "was your father happy?"
     was your f. ptc happy
(17) Oedd. "Yes".
     was

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[6] There is a Cornish language revival movement in Cornwall, but there are probably still not any fluent native speakers of the language known as "Resurrected Cornish"

Breton speakers vary greatly in their competence in Breton. Dressler (1981) refers to relatively healthy, preterminal and terminal speakers. Terminal speakers are no longer able to communicate in Breton with a sufficient degree of fluency or comfort to make such communication likely. Even preterminal speakers, however, avoid the responsive system and use invariant words corresponding to French *oui* and *non* when speaking Breton. Thomas (1973) notes a simplification of the responsive system in a Welsh dialect. Preterminal Breton speakers also tend to realign word order to the SVO pattern of modern standard French.[7]

In conclusion, we appeal to multiple causation for the observed drift towards SVO in Welsh and Breton. This is encouraged both by a universal communicative principle of "old before new" and by the language contact situation at hand. Conversely, this very language contact situation may be invoked to explain the existence of *brezhoneg chimik*. The artificially introduced VSO order of "Chemical Breton" is a reaction against the SVO order felt to be French, but also due to "a Welsh-based idea of what a Celtic language should be" (Varin 1979:83).

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[7] Valleo (1922) notes, and condemns, a tendency of Breton writers to use SV "French" order in subordinate clauses.

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