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# Modern Eastern Armenian: SOV or SVO?

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## 1 Introduction

The question of whether the ‘unmarked’ or ‘canonical’ word order in Modern Eastern Armenian (MEA)<sup>1</sup> is (S)OV or (S)VO is a matter of controversy. MEA can be considered a flexible language with respect to the ordering possibilities of the three major constituents S, O, and, V, at the clausal level. This means that all permutations, which give rise to six possible orders SOV, SVO, VSO, VOS, OVS, and OSV, are grammatical. Among these possible orders, two occur more frequently, SOV and SVO. Given that S occurs in the initial position in both cases, the controversy involves the relative order between O and V: Is MEA an OV or VO language?

With very few exceptions (Dum-Tragut, 2009, Dryer 2013), typological and descriptive studies have generally grouped Armenian with SOV languages (Der-Houssikian, 1978:227-8; Dryer, 1998:286, 310; Dum-Tragut, 2002; Hawkins, 1979:625; Hawkins 1983:286, Kozintseva, 1995: 8; Minassian, 1980: 263; among others<sup>2</sup>). The same holds for theoretical syntax studies of Armenian, mainly within the generative framework, which consider MEA a head-final language (Hodgson, 2013:6; Giorgi and Haroutyunian, 2016: 190; Kahnemuyipour and Megerdumian, 2011, 2017:81; Tamrazian, 1991: 101; Tamrazian, 1994:7): SOV is thus the ‘basic’ order, while SVO is ‘derived’ via movement (extraposition) to the postverbal position. There are also studies that claim that MEA has no dominant word order and is thus nonspecified between OV and VO (see for instance Dum-Tragut, 2009, Dryer 2013 in WALS). More interestingly, however, many Armenian grammars and handbooks on MEA syntax consider SVO to be the canonical or ‘recommended’ word order in Armenian (Abrahamyan et al., 1975; Arakelyan, 1958; Badikyan, 1976; Papoyan & Badikyan, 2003), indicating that the SOV order is usually used for either narrow focus marking or bare objects.

The claim on Armenian being an SOV language relies on two sets of arguments: 1) the typology of head-direction across various constituents; 2) ordering preferences at the clausal level, especially the position of the focus (section 2). The problem with generalizations on word order preferences at the clausal level is that they are not supported by quantitative studies. However, it is commonly assumed that identifying the ‘unmarked’ or ‘canonical’ word order in a given language is generally a matter of frequency (Greenberg 1966, Lambrecht 1996, among others) and hence needs to be investigated via quantitative methods.

The present study constitutes a first step in this direction. We carried out a preliminary corpus study to investigate the distribution of different possible word orders in MEA transitive sentences, using the Eastern Armenian National Corpus (section 3). The results of this preliminary investigation question the assumption on the markedness of the VO order (section 4).

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<sup>1</sup> Armenian constitutes an independent branch of the Indo-European language family and has two standards, Modern Eastern Armenian (hitherto MEA) and Modern Western Armenian. This study focuses on MEA, the language spoken in the contemporary Republic of Armenia and the Armenian communities of Iran and the ex-Soviet republics. The label ‘Armenian’ is used when no distinction is made between these two varieties.

<sup>2</sup> Note that some of these studies address the question of word order in Armenian without distinguishing between the Eastern and the Western varieties. In the absence of any large-scale quantitative investigation, we cannot claim that these two varieties diverge (or not) with respect to word order at the clausal level, especially that both are flexible and display both OV and VO orders.

## 2 Arguments in favor of MEA being (S)OV

The dominant view of MEA as an (S)OV language is based on two sets of arguments:

1. The direction of branching across constituents;
2. Ordering preferences and constraints, especially the position of the focus, at the clausal and/or VP level.

With respect to word order correlations (or harmonies) highlighted in typological literature (Greenberg 1966, Dryer 1992), Armenian (Eastern and Western) is a fairly consistently left-branching language (Donabedian 2010), which is typical of OV or head-final languages:

- Adpositions are mainly prepositions.
- Modifier adjectives precede the head noun within the NP.
- The genitive complement precedes the head noun within the NP.
- The standard of comparison precedes the parameter of comparison (adjective or adverb) in comparison constructions.
- The lexical verb precedes the auxiliary.
- The predicate precedes the copula.

The only exception with this respect is the position of the relative clause, which follows the head noun. Apart from the consistency of the branching direction across various types of constituents, other arguments can be put forward in favor of basic OV order. Some of these arguments have been mentioned in studies on the syntax of MEA, mainly within the generative framework. Their relevance depends on whether or not one adheres to a specific syntactic representation (configuration). Before going through these arguments, let us clarify that none of the studies cited in this section presents all of them. Actually, some of the arguments have never been evoked in any of the studies on MEA. We have nevertheless included them since they generally appear among arguments which serve to sort out between OV and VO basic orders in various languages (see, for instance, Asatiani and Skopeteas, 2012). Main (syntactic) arguments in favor of MEA's being OV are the following:

**2.1 The preverbal position of the primary focus** The preverbal position of the primary focus in MEA has generally been a crucial piece of evidence in favor of its classification as an OV language. The correlation between the preverbal focus phenomenon and the OV order is well documented in the literature since the early 70s (cf. Dezsó, 1974; Herring and Paolillo, 1995; Kim, 1988, for a general discussion), where it has been claimed that OV languages are more likely to encode focus preverbally than VO languages. Comrie (1988: 268) claims that “the basic rule in Modern Eastern Armenian is that the focus must immediately precede the finite verb form”<sup>3</sup>. This claim has generally been maintained in subsequent works (Dum-Tragut, 2009; Giorgi and Haroutyunian, 2016; Kahnemuyipour and Megerdooonian, 2011, 2017; Tamrazian, 1994). The main arguments in favor of the preverbal position of the primary focus are:

**2.1.1 The position of (WH-) interrogative pronouns** Interrogative pronouns always occur in the preverbal domain, most commonly immediately before the verb:

- (1)    ov        ēr                    marina        zelyonkina-n  
       Who    COP.PST.3SG    Marina        Zelyonkina-DEF  
       ‘Who was Marina Zelyonkina?’ (EANC)

**2.1.2 The position of the enclitic auxiliary verb** The auxiliary verb in MEA is an enclitic that carries tense and agreement features and attaches to various elements. Tamrazian (1994:12) provides the following principle for the placement of the auxiliary in MEA: “Being a head final language, the auxiliary verb. In this language appears as the rightmost element in declarative sentences”, or, in other words, the auxiliary follows the lexical verb. Note however that as mentioned by Tamrazian herself, this is not the unique position for the

<sup>3</sup> Note that Comrie claims at the same time that the obligatory preverbal position involves only interrogative pronouns. Otherwise, the focus can also be placed immediately after the verb.

placement of the auxiliary. The latter is placed in a variety of positions depending on various factors. It is beyond the scope of this paper to thoroughly discuss the rules of the placement of the auxiliary in MEA. Roughly speaking, in focus neutral (or unmarked) affirmative sentences, the auxiliary appears: a) on the lexical verb in intransitive constructions, ex. (2); b) attaches to the preverbal element of the ‘compound verb’ or the ‘complex predicate’, ex. (3); c) is placed after the direct object, in case the latter is bare or indefinite, ex. (4); and d) attaches to the verb, in transitive constructions with a definite direct object, ex. (5).

(2)    pieř-ə       k’ayl-um    ē                    hyurasrah-um  
Peter-DEF    walk-IPFV   be.AUX.PST.3SG   sitting.room-LOC  
‘Peter was walking in the sitting room.’ (EANC)

(3)    durs        ēm                    gal-is  
out        be.AUX.PRS.1SG   come-IPFV  
‘I am going out.’ (EANC)

(4)    xot        ē                    ut-um        kov-i        pes  
grass    be.AUX.PRS.3SG   eat-IPFV    cow-GEN    like  
‘He eats the grass like a cow.’ (EANC)

(5)    davit’-ə    čaš-n        ut-um        e  
David-DEF   meal-DEF   eat-IPFV    be.AUX.PRS.3SG  
‘David is eating the meal.’ (EANC)

Crucially, in marked (non focus-neutral) sentences, the auxiliary attaches to the focused constituent of the sentence (Hodgson, 2013: 27, among others). This fact is illustrated by the obligatory placement of the auxiliary after interrogative pronouns, regardless of the type of the verbal construction.

(6)    bayts’    inč’u        ē                    inʒ        nayum  
but        why        be.AUX.PRS.3SG   I.DAT    look-IPFV  
‘But why is [he] looking at me?’

**2.2 The preverbal position of bare objects** Armenian displays bare nouns, that is, nouns used with no determination or quantification. These nouns have either a kind-level or existential reading. When used as DOs, they generally tend to be in a close or cohesive semantic relationship with the verb. Although all studies admit the possibility for the DOs to occur post verbally, bare (non-determined, non-quantified) DOs seem to enjoy less freedom and display a strong preference for the immediately preverbal position (Badikyan 1976:157, Dum-Tragut 2009:562<sup>4</sup>, among others).

(7)    t’atron-I    tomsarkꝰ-ic’    toms    gn-ec’i  
theatre-GEN   box-office-ABL   ticket   buy-AOR.3SG  
‘[I] bought a ticket from the box-office of the theatre.’

**2.3 Word order in VP idioms** The word order in VP idioms can be a cue to the basic word order in flexible languages. It is generally assumed that information structure is one of the main factors in the choice of a given order among various possibilities. Since idiomatic sequences are generally semantically opaque (i.e. non compositional), their components cannot bear specific discourse properties (e.g. topicality, givenness, etc.), which implies that contextually triggered word order variations cannot apply to idiomatic sequences. In other words, word order in such sequences is syntactically determined and corresponds to the basic word order in a given language (see Asatiani & Skopeteas, 2012, among others). Idiomatic VPs display OV order in MEA:

(8)    a. dagay mtnel (lit. coffin enter) ‘to die’  
      b. Layn sirt unenal (lit. large heart have) ‘to be lenient’

<sup>4</sup> In reality Dum-Tragut’s generalization concerns all indefinite and non-specific DOs, whether they are bare or determined.

**2.4 The preverbal position of low adverbs** Low adverbs are adverbs whose scope is the VP, and therefore are placed “low” in the syntactic structure. They generally occur in the vicinity of the verb, and either immediately precede it or are placed at the left edge of the focus phrase. Their appearance in other positions yields a marked interpretation. In MEA, these adverbs have also been assumed to mark the edge of VP (Tamrazian, 1994: 172).

- (9) Nrank’ arag veradam-um en u šržapatum Misak-in  
 They quickly return-IPFV be.AUX.PRS.3PL and surround-IPFV Misak-DAT.DEF  
 ‘They return quickly and surround Misak.’

To sum up, several features of the MEA favor its grouping with OV or head-final languages and consider the VO order to be pragmatically marked and related to information packaging. That is, SVO is viewed as a case of right dislocation resulting from the right movement of the DO to a postverbal position. If indeed SVO is a ‘marked’ order then it should be identifiable as such by quantitative studies, provided they comply with methodological requirements.

### 3 Our corpus investigation

We carried out a corpus study to investigate the distribution of different possible word orders in MEA transitive sentences, using the Eastern Armenian National corpus (EANC). EANC is a large-scale open access corpus (<http://eanc.net/>) with about 110 million tokens consisting of both written discourse and oral discourse, which offers a powerful search engine for making different types of queries. In order to constitute a sample of sentences displaying a transitive construction, we looked for finite verbs with a high potential to appear in transitive constructions, such as *sirel* ‘like’ or *spanel* ‘kill’.

We successively extracted 400 tokens with *sirel* ‘like’ at the present tense and 150 tokens at the past tense, more precisely the aorist form, as well as 350 tokens with *spanel* ‘kill’ at the present tense. Note that the aorist is a simple tense, while the present tense is periphrastic, formed by the imperfective participle and the auxiliary *linel* ‘be’. Note also that in order to neutralize the issue of the auxiliary placement, we limited our query to occurrences where the participle immediately precedes the auxiliary (i.e. the auxiliary and the lexical verb are contiguous). Consequently, the simple and the periphrastic tenses become comparable, in that the word order variation is limited to the order between the DO and the verb (as a whole).

In sum, we extracted a total of 900 occurrences including 400 simplex and 500 periphrastic forms, that we annotated manually. Filtering out irrelevant occurrences (e.g. passive constructions, interrogative sentences, etc.), we obtained a sample of 570 occurrences containing a subject, a DO and a verb. This sample contains 338 instances of periphrastic verbal forms and 231 instances of simple verbs. We first annotated our sample for word order. Table 1 presents the distribution of word order in this sample and Table 2 presents the distribution of word order by verbal form for SOV and SVO orders (excluding infrequent orders which leaves us with a total of 543 occurrences).

Orders	Nb. of occ.	%
OSV	7	1.2%
OVS	15	2.6%
SOV	93	16.3%
SVO	450	78.9%
VOS	2	<0.5%
VSO	3	0.5%
Total	570	100%

Form \ Order	SOV	SVO	Total
Periphrastic	40	287	327
Simple	53	163	216
Total	93	450	543

We observe that SVO is by far the most frequent order (78.9%) and remains so independent of the verbal form: SVO is by far more frequent than SOV in sentences with simple verbal forms (87.5% vs.12.5%), as well as with the periphrastic form (75.5% vs. 24.5%). Importantly, when we study these occurrences more closely, we see that the SVO order maps into an ‘all focus’ discourse configuration in a fair share of cases. This is illustrated by the following examples:

- (9)    yes       sir-um       ēm           ayd kerpar-ə  
         I.NOM   like-IPFV   be.AUX.1SG   that character-DEF  
         ‘I like that character.’
- (10)   nrank’   span-ets’in   mez  
         They   kill-AOR.1PL   we.DAT  
         ‘They killed us.’

We then annotated our sample for other potentially relevant factors, such as the realization of the DO (Table 3), with a particular interest in DO’s degree of definiteness. We hence limited our sample to the three possible determinations for DOs in MEA: 1) bare, that is, a noun carrying no determination or quantification, ex. *girk* ‘book’, 2) indefinite, that is, an NP with an indefinite determination such as *mi girk* ‘a book’, and 3) definite, that is, an NP with a definite determination such as *girk-ə* ‘the book’. Table 4 provides the distribution of word order in this sample (a total of 380 occurrences) with respect to the definiteness DO.

DO type \ Order	SVO	SOV	Total
Bare	13	4	17
Indefinite	18	5	23
Definite	269	71	340
Infinitive	86	0	86
Clausal	5	0	5
Others	59	13	72
Total	450	93	543

First, we observe that our sample is not well balanced for different types: indefinite and bare DOs are very scarce. For definite DOs, SVO is clearly the most frequent order (79.1% vs. 20.9). Our sample shows a bias towards the SVO order for bare and indefinite DOs also. However, the limited number of occurrences in these categories (respectively, 17 and 23) does allow for a conclusive generalization.

Table 4: Word order by DO definiteness			
DO type \ Order	SOV	SVO	Total
Bare	4	13	17
Indefinite	5	18	23
Definite	71	269	340
Total	80	300	380

#### 4 Discussion and conclusion

These findings present a serious challenge for any assumption on the markedness of the SVO order in MEA. Even though there may be a corpus-related bias, the word order distribution in our sample nevertheless undermines such an assumption. Indeed, the rate of the SVO order is too high to qualify as a marked option.

Especially the fact that definite DOs are overwhelmingly postverbal is line with Badikyan's (1976) as well as Dum-Tragut's (2009) claim that the placement of the DO is not random and that it is triggered by the (in)definiteness of the DO, with indefinite (bare included) DOs being preferably preverbal, while definite DOs tend to occur post-verbally.

Badikyan (1976) is one of the first and most detailed studies on the matter and also the first attempt to provide corpus-based generalizations. Based on 8 selected corpora of various 'genres' or types (juridical, literature, scientific...) of about 185 words each, Badikyan (1976: 154) claims that "in the ordinary order, the direct object is placed after the predicate in all types of texts." In two cases, however, the preverbal position of the DO is preferred or even obligatory:

1. The speaker wants to draw the attention of their interlocutor on the DO and to emphasize it. In this case, the DO bears what Badikyan calls the 'logical accent' of the sentence.
2. The DO is indefinite.

The first case can be considered a marked order, in which the DO realizes the narrow or contrastive focus. Badikyan also mentions that the auxiliary is placed after the DO in this case and thus precedes the lexical verb, which is another cue for considering this order as marked: in other words, the preverbal position of the DO is a deliberate choice on behalf of the speaker to focus it.

The second case, on the other hand, should not be considered to be a 'variation' or a 'choice', as explicitly stated by Badikyan, who claims that the VO order for indefinite DOs is 'unfamiliar' or 'strange' in MEA. It should be mentioned at this point that the only examples Badikyan provides to illustrate the obligatorily preverbal position of indefinite DOs are bare nouns. Consequently, we could safely rephrase his generalization in (2) above as: Bare DOs must occur preverbally. To sum up, according to Badikyan:

1. Bare DOs must occur preverbally;
2. All other DOs occur post-verbally in the basic or unmarked word order. Preverbal placement implies a narrow focus status for definite DOs.

If these generalizations are shown to be empirically sound, then OV and VO orders do not have the same distribution. The relevance of definiteness in the pre- or post-verbal position of the DO has also been noted by Dum-Tragut (2009: 562) 'Both in written and spoken MEA, native speakers, with overwhelming

frequency, prefer the word order SVO for definite direct objects and SOV for indefinite or non-specific direct objects.' Dum-Tragut also notes that even indefinite DOs tend to occur post-verbally provided there are several DOs (i.e. coordination of indefinite DOs or a sequence of multiple indefinite DOs) (p. 563), which could be considered as a case of heavy NP shift.

If future studies confirm the relevance of the determination in the placement of the DO, then, taking into account infinitive and clausal DOs, a new picture of word order preferences on the clausal level emerges for MEA:

- Indefinite/Bare DOs tend to precede the verb;
- Definite DOs tend to follow the verb;
- Infinitive DOs generally follow the verb;
- Clausal DOs always follow the verb.

So, from a strictly distributional point of view, OV is in minority (marked) and the default word order is VO. If these preliminary findings were to be confirmed by further quantitative studies, then MEA would represent the case of a typically 'OV' language with respect to word order correlations across constituents, while being VO at the clausal level. This situation is reminiscent to some extent of Georgian, another OV language spoken in the area. As mentioned by Asatiani and Skopeteas (2012: 128), quantitative studies show that both OV and VO orders occur in Georgian at an approximately equal rate. Studies on word order variation in Georgian have mainly focused on information structure, especially the issue of a post-verbal focus (Skopeteas and Fanselow, 2010), but do not look into definiteness. It would be interesting to investigate the same issue in Georgian in order to have a more general view on the role played by definiteness on the position of the DO. Importantly, it has been shown that definiteness plays a role in determining the position of the DO in Persian, another OV language (see Samvelian, 2018: 242-256, for a review). However, unlike MEA, definite DOs in Persian 'move' leftward, scrambling over PP arguments and are placed at a distance of the verb. While, in MEA they 'move' rightward and are placed after the verb. Despite these opposite directions, both placement tendencies could be the manifestation of the same phenomenon.

Another issue to investigate is the position of indefinite DOs. Like MEA, Persian displays both bare objects (non-determined/quantified) and indefinite objects (marked by an indefinite determiner). Quantitative studies on Persian have shown that these two types of DOs do not behave in the same way with respect to their ordering preferences (Faghiri, 2016; Faghiri and Samvelian, 2014, 2016; Faghiri et al., 2014, 2018). Surprisingly (and contrary to common assumptions in many studies), indefinite DOs group with definite DOs. Bare DOs, on the contrary, stay adjacent to the verb. It could well be the case that same tendencies hold for MEA too, which would explain why all examples given by Badikyan (1976) and Dum-Tragut to illustrate the preverbal position of indefinite DOs are in fact bare DOs. If this was to be confirmed, the OV would have an even more limited distribution suggestion that at the clausal level MEA is not really head-final. Further studies are required to evaluate these findings.

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