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Word Order in New Guinea:
# Dispelling a Myth

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It has been claimed that the appearance of SVO order in a non-Austronesian language of New Guinea and its environs is evidence of contact and influence from Austronesian languages. I suggest that, because SVO is an innovative order in Austronesian languages as well, the influence might well be in the other direction, from a period before the popularization of SOV in New Guinea.

1. Assumptions about the order of elements. The modal order of elements in clauses in languages from New Guinea is SOV. No one would dispute this, and examples are easy to come by. The following five sentences serve as examples of the wide spread of SOV word order in New Guinea. The examples are from Fore, a Goroka language from the eastern highlands; Lani, a Dani language from the western highlands; Skou, a Skou language from the coast of north-central New Guinea; Kimaama, a Kolopom language from the Frederik Hendrik island on the south coast; and Magi, a language of the southeast of Papua. The first two—and possibly the last two—of these languages are

MAP: LOCATIONS OF THE LANGUAGES REFERRED TO
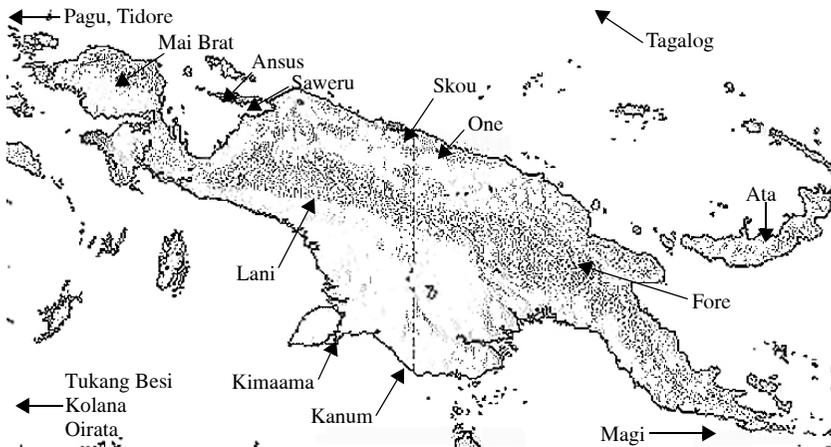
members of the widespread Trans New Guinea family, but Skou is not related to them.[1]
In any event, the languages are widely dispersed in New Guinea, and are not closely
related. The SOV word order found in each of them cannot be assumed to be the result of
either common inheritance, or areal spread.

> FORE
>
> (1) Mási áragá   á-ga-y-e.
> boy   girl   3SG.OBJ-see-3SG.SBJ-IND
> 'The boy sees the girl.'

> LANI
>
> (2) Wulaga ti   kweliga ke-g-e.
> boy   that   girl   see-REALIS-3SG
> 'The boy saw the girl.'

> SKOU
>
> (3) Ke=angku=ing a pe=angku   ke=fu.
> 3SG.NF=child=the   3SG.F=child   3SG.NF-see.F
> 'The boy saw the girl.'

> KIMAAMA
>
> (4) Naa   ŋga-naβu   r-aβu.
> 1SG.NOM   2SG.POSS-child   3SG.P-see
> 'I saw your child.'

> MAGI
>
> (5) Noa ma   egi   ʔomu   eri-a …
> he   ERG   man   one   saw-2/3SG
> 'He saw the man …'

Examining Papuan languages from beyond the mainland of New Guinea we find
many examples of SOV order; the following examples come from languages in east-
ern Indonesia, and are typical for their regions. Many of the non-Austronesian lan-
guages of eastern Melanesia also display verb-final word orders, particularly those
languages that are found at the eastern edge of the spread in the Solomons, or in
more heavily interior regions such as Bougainville.

> PAGU (NORTH HALMAHERA, WEST PAPUAN)
>
> (6) Ai   ngoak   t-o-m-i-olik-oka-ou.
> my   child   1SG.A-SU-3SG.F.P-H-bath-NFUT-PFV
> 'I've already bathed my daughter.'

> KOLANA (EASTERN ALOR, TRANS NEW GUINEA?)
>
> (7) nakale gaida   anin-a   g-ken   gai-suru-medi-ptiki.
> then   3SG   PERSON-DEF   3ABS-cloth   3DAT-remove-take-open
> 'Then the person took his cloth off.'

Not all languages in the New Guinea region are SOV languages, however. We
can identify several areas in which other word orders are prevalent:

• the Bird's Head region in western New Guinea;

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1. Data are drawn from my own field notes, and the following sources: Ata, Yanagida pers.
comm.; Fore, Scott 1978; Magi, Thomson 1975; Maybrat, Dol 1999; Pagu, Wimbish 1991;
Tidore, Van Staden 2000.

- the Torricelli languages in northeast New Guinea;
- many Austronesian languages in the area, both east and west;
- many non-Austronesian languages to the east of mainland New Guinea;
- some languages in the extreme south of New Guinea and the northeast.

The first three of these exceptions involve the appearance of SVO modal order (the last exception involves languages such as Yimas or Kanum with free word order at the clause level). Particularly prominent are the Austronesian languages that have not had extensive contact with Papuan languages, which overwhelmingly show SVO word order.

Examples of SVO orders in Papuan languages can be seen in (8–11), illustrating with sentences from Maybrat, a West Papuan language of the central Bird's Head; One, a western Torricelli language from northern New Guinea; Ata, a Papuan language from New Britain (data courtesy of Tatsuya Yanagida); and Kanum, a language of southern New Guinea. The first three languages have SVO word order, while Kanum has free word order at the clausal level. Ansus, a language from western Yapen island, is given in (12) as an example of an Austronesian language with SVO order.

MAYBRAT
(8) Ana   m-kai   mes.
    3PL   3-meet   fern.vegetable
    'They found fern vegetables.'

ONE
(9) Mala   wani   pala.
    child   see   dog
    'The child saw the dog.'

ATA
(10) Anu   molomolo   mu-mai-sou   aqaa   vile.
     3SG.M   child   3SG.M-see-3SG.M   dog   one
     'The boy saw a dog.'

KANUM
(11) a. Klawo-w   krar   s-aow-y.
        child-ERG   dog   OBJ-see-T.PST.SG.SBJ
        'The child saw the dog.'
     b. Klawow saowy krar.
     c. Krar klawow saowy.
     d. Krar saowy klawow.
     e. Saowy klawow krar.
     f. Saowy krar klawow.

ANSUS
(12) Kumai   r<i>eo   wona.
     child   see<3SG>   dog
     'The child saw the dog.'

It has been popularly assumed that those non-Austronesian languages with SVO order have acquired it from contact with Austronesian languages. This view is evident in a number of authors, and the selection of quotes below is only representative, but not by any means exhaustive.

… the almost universally present word order subject-object-verb, with the verb constituting the last word in a clause or sentence, may be mentioned. (Wurm, Laycock, and Voorhoeve 1975:172)

Basic Word Order: rigid: subject-object-verb (Wurm, Laycock, and Voorhoeve 1975:188, referring to Trans New Guinea phylum languages)

Basic clausal constituent order is SOV. (Foley 1998:513)

… most Papuan languages of the TNG phylum have the verb in the sentence final position … the Subject … normally precedes the Object … so that we may speak of a basic SOV order in these languages. (Reesink 1987:18–19)

IP → (NP$_{SUBJ}$) VP; VP → (NP$_{OBJ}$) V (Donohue 2005a:243)

As mentioned, it is true that many of the Austronesian languages spoken further west, across Indonesia, also show an SVO modal word order, such as Indonesian, shown in (13). Other examples would not be hard to find.

INDONESIAN
(13) Anak   me-lihat   anjing.
      child   AV-see   dog
      'The child saw the dog.'

This fact has been taken as lending support to the hypothesis that SVO orders in New Guinea owe their origin to the intrusion of the Austronesians in the area.

2. Why is SVO an "Austronesian" order? We can, however, easily find fault with this argument. We are reasonably certain that the Austronesian ancestors of the modern Austronesian population in Southeast Asia and Melanesia spoke verb-initial languages; this is still the dominant order in the more conservative languages to the north, in northern Borneo, the Philippines, and Taiwan, and is also the word order found on the edges of the insular Southeast Asian languages, where, for instance, Nias, Enggano, and Tukang Besi, all at the outer edges of the Western Malayo-Polynesian area, preserve a verb-initial order. Examples from Tagalog, in the northern Philippines, and Tukang Besi, from Southeast Sulawesi, illustrate this point.

TAGALOG
(14) Na-kita   ng   bata   ang   aso.
      PV.PFV-see   GEN   child   NOM   dog
      'The child saw the dog.'

TUKANG BESI
(15) No-'ita='e   te   ana   na   'obu.
      3R-see=3P   CORE   child   NOM   dog
      'The child saw the dog.'

If the original word order in Austronesian languages was predicate-initial, what, then, was the motivation for the current SVO order in many southern and eastern languages? Cummings (1991) presents historical reasons for the reanalysis of an earlier attested variety of Malay with verb-initial order into the modern SVO order, and Blust (1997) suggests, very plausibly, that the reanalysis of the *-in-* perfective marker as a passive-like marker, along with the loss of certain other prefixes and suffixes, was a

factor in the switch from verb-initial to subject-initial syntax. An argument that sup-
poses a verb-initial language with the option of coding material that is pragmatically
salient in some way in a preverbal position is both plausible and attested in the conser-
vative varieties of Austronesian. It is not implausible to suggest that the preverbal posi-
tion became used more and more frequently with topical subjects to the point that the
basic order changed from verb-initial to subject-initial, as shown in (16). Examples of
stage I have been seen in (14) and (15); stage II is attested in both Tagalog and Tukang
Besi, shown in (17) and (18). Indonesian, seen in (13), represents stage IV, and stage III
is the hypothesized stage linking these different order possibilities.

> POSSIBLE PATH FOR WORD ORDER REANALYSIS
> (16) Stage I   VOS
>   Stage II   VOS ~ S, VO   [pragmatically marked variant]
>   Stage III   VOS ~ SVO   [stylistic variant]
>   Stage IV   SVO
>
> TAGALOG WITH PRAGMATICALLY SALIENT ACTOR
> (17) Ang   bata   '(a)y naka-kita   ng   aso.
>   NOM   child AY   AV.PFV-see   GEN   dog
>   'The child saw a dog.'
>
> TUKANG BESI WITH PRAGMATICALLY SALIENT ACTOR
> (18) Te   ana   no-'ita   te   aso.
>   CORE child 3R-see   CORE   dog
>   'The child saw a dog.'

While plausible, this cannot be the complete answer. Given that we have attested
instances of VOS order, with the possibility of coding a pragmatically determined ele-
ment in a preverbal position, which have *not* switched to a modal SVO order—this is
just another example of the well-reported conservatism of Austronesian languages,
often discussed in relation to their lexicon and morphology but also present in terms of
certain syntactic traits—we must still ask why the Austronesian languages in Southeast
Asia and Melanesia have shifted to this order, while those in the Philippines and Tai-
wan have, in the main, not.

We can, however, observe that Malay is spoken at the intersection of insular and
mainland Southeast Asia, a region where SVO languages abound, as seen in (19),
illustrating Thai.

> THAI
> (19) Dèk   hěn   mǎa.
>   child see   dog
>   'The child sees the dog.'

It is not too much to suppose that when pre-Malay came into the Southeast Asian
area and came into contact with speakers of SVO languages, the tendency toward
fronting the subject in the clause was "enhanced" to the point that subject-initial
became the new modal word order. The Austronesian languages of the Philippines,
Taiwan, and northern Borneo, which did not have an "SVO experience" until much
more recently, did not encounter this additional motivation for word order reanaly-
sis. The fact that verb-initial orders are found at the periphery of the Western

Malayo-Polynesian area suggests that the change to SVO was a popular one that spread from some sociocultural center or centers, and affected many, but not all, of the Austronesian languages in the region. SVO order cannot be assumed to be ancestral for the Austronesian languages of Southeast Asia, but the result of an innovation that applied following their arrival and dispersal in the region, possibly helped along by language contact.
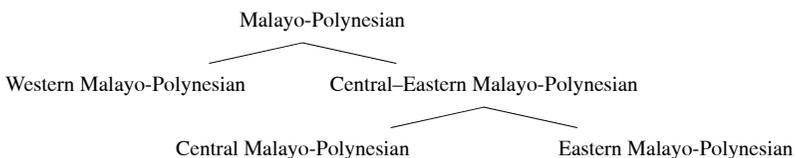
3. SVO in Melanesia. What, then, of the SVO order found in the Austronesian languages of the east of the Indonesian archipelago and in the southwest Pacific? There are two immediately obvious hypotheses:

1.   SVO was inherited from the SVO innovations in western Indonesia;
2.   SVO was independently innovated in eastern Indonesia.

The first hypothesis is unlikely, given that the innovation of SVO order in western Indonesia took place following the dispersal of the languages. For SVO to be an inherited feature of the eastern Austronesian languages we would have to assume that the ancestor of the languages (say, Proto–Central-Eastern Malayo-Polynesian) had already become SVO. Given that not all Western Malayo-Polynesian languages in western Indonesia show SVO order, we cannot reconstruct the innovation back as far as Proto–WMP (if there was such an entity), and certainly not as far back as Proto-MP (with similar provisos), which would be necessary for Proto–CEMP to have inherited SVO from western Indonesia (see table 1).

   The second hypothesis has the same plausibilities, and problems, as the hypothesis of SVO development in western Indonesia. A tendency toward subject-initial clauses can be assumed on (near-)universal grounds, based on the left position of pragmatically salient information and the generally high pragmatic salience of subjects. But again, we need to identify some factor that "tipped the scales" and led to the innovation. It might be that the innovation in western Indonesia spread to eastern Indonesia; arguments against this include the fact that languages along the WMP border with Central Malayo-Polynesian do not have rigidly SVO order, if at all. If these languages do not provide the transmission required for the languages further east to acquire SVO, we must propose an untestable and complicated historical scenario involving a language such as, say, Tukang Besi (found at the conjunction of the Sea of Flores and the Banda Sea) losing its verb-initialness, becoming SVO, transmitting this innovative word order to the (not closely related) languages further east, and then re-acquiring a verb-initial order. Alternatively, we could posit a set of languages that previously existed along the eastern border of the WMP region and were SVO, which have since been replaced. Both of these hypotheses are possible, but they are not the simplest scenarios we can come up with.

TABLE 1. BROAD SUBGROUPING WITHIN AUSTRONESIAN

Malayo-Polynesian

Western Malayo-Polynesian   Central–Eastern Malayo-Polynesian

Central Malayo-Polynesian   Eastern Malayo-Polynesian

A simpler hypothesis assumes that the Austronesian languages of eastern Indonesian acquired their SVO order in situ, from preexisting SVO languages. Evidence from some headedness settings in individual languages supports the notion that the change to SVO was a recent one. In Palu'e, an Austronesian language of north-central Flores, the modal word order is SVO; verb-initial orders are not grammatical. The earlier Austronesian word order has changed.

PALU'E
(20) a. Ana   lie   sau
         child   see   dog
         'The child saw the dog.'
     b. * Lie sau ana
     c. * Lie ana sau

Examining patterns in the NP, we find that the genitive clitics—one of the few pieces of productive morphology in the language that is stable and not currently in the process of grammaticalizing—follow the head.

PALU'E
(21)   Ana-gu   lie   sau-n
         child-1GEN   see   dog-3GEN
         'My/Our child saw her/his/their dog.'

This is a pattern typically associated with head-initial orders, not with head-final orders (the order of the other elements in the NP is equivocal, since both head-initial and head-final languages favor other modifiers in a postnominal position). The postnominal genitives contrast with the prenominal position favored in non-Austronesian languages, such as the Oirata example in (22), or *g-ken* 'his cloth' from Kolana, in (7).

OIRATA
(22) an   ihar
     1SG.POSS   dog
     'my dog'

The fact that the shift to SVO has not completely affected all the word orders in the language suggests a shift in the not-too-distant past, implying that SVO in Palu'e is the result of influence from another language rather than being an inherited characteristic.[2] This suggests the notion of a preexisting local SVO substrate in eastern Indonesia. Is there any supporting evidence for SVO being "native" in eastern Indonesia / New Guinea?

4. The non-SOV regions of New Guinea. As mentioned earlier, there are a number of regions in New Guinea in which SVO orders are found, namely the Torricelli area and the Bird's Head area. These two areas are quite distinct in their obvious sociolinguistic histories: the Bird's Head is an area of multiple contact and complex areal tendencies obscuring the genetic history of the languages there. The Torricelli

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2. The fact that some Austronesian languages that are spoken in areas that adjoin islands that still contain non-Austronesian language speaking populations have shifted to prenominal possessive marking (such as Tugun; Hinton [1991] lists *u-raha* 1SG.POSS-house 'my house', for instance) shows that we are dealing with different amounts of influence in different areas.

languages, on the other hand, show little evidence of having been in contact with other languages, specifically coastal populations, until very recently. In the main Torricelli area only two languages, Arapesh and Walman, are spoken along the coast, and the movement to the coast is recent, at least in the case of Arapesh. We have, in short, no evidence that the dominant SVO order of the Torricelli languages owes its existence to Austronesian influence.

The languages of the Bird's Head are not obviously related to each other (in the standard comparative sense), though the central and western languages appear to belong to the West Papuan group, which extends from Yapen island to the east out to Halmahera in the west (though firm evidence is hard to find). This area, in short, seems to represent a very ancient contact area. We have already seen that the West Papuan languages of Halmahera do not have SVO orders (see the Pagu example in [6]). The non-Austronesian languages of Yapen, too, have verb-final order, as seen in the Saweru example in (23).

> SAWERU
> (23) Arian-e   fo=mae   a-en-i.
>   child-DEF 3SG.M.NOM=dog   3SG.M.GEN-see-TNS
>   'The child saw the dog.'

There are exceptions to this trend toward West Papuan languages displaying a verb-final word order outside the Bird's Head: in Ternate and Tidore, from Halmahera, extensive recent contact with Austronesians has resulted in SVO order, and in Saweru dative objects are optionally coded postverbally.

> TIDORE
> (24) Una   wo-danata   fis   ngge.
>   3SG.M   3SG.M.A-steal bicycle   3SG.NH.there
>   'He stole that bike.'(van Staden 2000:268)

> SAWERU
> (25) Arian-e   fo=komi-rai   mae.
>   child-DEF 3SG.M.NOM=see-3SG.M.DAT dog
>   'The child saw the dog.'

Regardless of these exceptions, it is true that in general the West Papuan languages are SOV. What, then, is the cause of SVO in the Bird's Head? Austronesian contact cannot easily be assumed, because the SVO order is found even in the very center of the peninsula. I suggest that the SVO order in the Bird's Head, as well as the confused genetic history of the peninsula, can be explained by assuming an earlier substrate in the area, one that predated the spread of the West Papuan languages. This earlier language group was SVO, and in all likelihood this word order reflected a pattern found over a wide part of the island world in eastern Indonesia at the time. It is reasonably certain that there were non-Austronesian speaking populations over most, if not all, of eastern Indonesia prior to the arrival of the Austronesian-speaking peoples 4,000 years ago. We have modern attestations of non-Austronesian populations in Timor, Kisar, Alor, and Pantar, as well as the already-mentioned West Papuan speakers of northern Halmahera, and there is no reason not to suppose that essentially all of eastern Indonesia

was inhabited tens of thousands of years ago, given the archaeological record in Australia and New Guinea. If this earlier linguistic population spoke languages with SVO orders, we would have just the ingredient we need to explain the development of SVO order in the Austronesian languages that entered the area. Rather than being an innovation based on contact with Austronesians, the SVO order in the Bird's Head languages represents a relic of this earlier time; that these languages, and not those of Halmahera or Yapen, should preserve this order is supported by the existence of wide-ranging trade networks, attested in the *kain timur* traditions, that linked the Bird's Head to other parts of insular eastern Indonesia.

The SVO order found in the Torricelli languages can be attributed simply to that being the word order in that language family. The fact that there is no evidence of strong contact from, or to, a passing Austronesian population means that the Torricelli languages are not part of an account of SVO orders in the New Guinea region. What, though, of the SOV order, which remains prevalent?

To start with, we do not need to "explain" the presence of SOV languages, because they are not only modal in the New Guinea area, but are modal across the world. If we want to examine the distribution of SOV patterns in New Guinea in more detail we find that they are most fixed in the highlands, and areas that represent "spill" from the highlands into surrounding regions. Unlike the widely separated SVO language areas, SOV is basically contiguous in mainland New Guinea. The areas that are not contiguous include the eastern island populations in Bougainville and the Solomons, and the languages of Timor, Kisar, Alor, and Pantar. This latter population is thought to represent a relatively recent east-to-west migration of languages, probably from the Bomberai area, and so do not figure in any account of SOV in mainland New Guinea. The eastern languages might be SOV for any number of reasons, though the fact that the languages that are more distant from the mainland of New Guinea are the ones that show more SOV patterns implies that SOV was the earlier pattern *in and to the east of New Guinea*; but it does not bear on a discussion of the linguistic prehistory of western New Guinea (and surrounding areas).

5. An alternative scenario. In summary, there is nothing wrong with assuming an original SVO word order in (many?) languages native to at least some parts of New Guinea. Among the currently attested languages this is the dominant pattern in the northeast (among the Torricelli languages) and the far west (evidenced in the Bird's Head). The SVO area was probably once much greater than it is now; this would be required if we are to assume that substantial contact with SVO languages was one of the factors that initiated the shift to SVO in the ancestors of the Austronesian languages currently attested in eastern Indonesia. We do have evidence of a relatively recent spread of the languages asserted to belong to the Trans New Guinea group across much of the island, through the central cordillera, from east to west. If we posit an earlier SOV area in the east, as seemed likely in the discussion of the geographic dispersion of this word order type in the non-Austronesian, non–Trans New Guinea languages of eastern Papua New Guinea and the Solomons, this spread from the east would be a plausible mechanism for the transferral of this linguistic feature to the center and west of New Guinea, obscuring earlier non-SOV patterns.

It has long been assumed that SVO order in the New Guinea region is a "feature" of Austronesian languages, as opposed to the Papuan languages. But it is at least as plausible that the Austronesians acquired SVO from the Melanesians they encountered as they moved east toward New Guinea. (Reesink [2005] similarly suggests that some features of Proto-Oceanic have their origins in the ancestors of the non-Austronesian languages currently found on New Britain and other eastern Melanesian islands, and Donohue [2005b] argues against the perceived "Austronesianness" of certain other grammatical features such as the presence of an inclusive/exclusive distinction.) A subsequent expansion of SOV-ordered Trans New Guinea speakers has obscured much of the direct evidence for this earlier substrate, as has the Austronesian expansion itself, in which the original non-Austronesian population of the islands west of New Guinea have all but lost their non-Austronesian languages, with only a few areas retaining their original linguistic heritage.

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