

Word order and other considerations

Latin MILC – W8, HT 2013

March 05, 2013

1 Constituent Order

Latin is a free word order language; in principle, therefore, almost any constituent of a sentence may take any position, depending on emphasis, novelty, rhetoric, etc.

There are, however, tendencies for the most common, and thus preferable word order in good prose. Note, for this purpose, that the most emphatic positions in a sentence are its beginning and its end.

1.1 Common/unmarked word order

There is a great scholarly debate about whether there was a regular word order or not; for our purposes, however, assume that a sequence SUBJECT - OBJECT - PREDICATE is the most unmarked, if not necessarily the most frequent constellation. All other parts of the sentence are placed in the middle, in closest vicinity to the constituent to which they relate.

- (1) *Canis magnus agricolae, bestia saevissima, heri in foro filio regis vulnus intulisse dicitur.*
The great dog of the farmer, a most savage beast, is said to have inflicted a wound upon the king's son in the forum yesterday.

If a verb governs two objects (e.g. *dare, mittere*), the dative object commonly precedes the accusative object.

- (2) *Tu, tu, inquam, M. Antoni, princeps Caesari omnia perturbare cupienti causam belli contra patriam inferendi dedisti.*
You, you, I say, Marc Anthony, have given cause to Caesar, who was intent on mixing it all up anyways, to wage war against his fatherland.

1.2 *Thema vs rhema*

More often than not, however, this 'regular' word order is altered due to considerations of emphasis or connection; particularly the beginning of a sentence is often dominated by the *thema*, i.e. the information already presented and here re-iterated, or the *rhema*, i.e. a new piece of information given pride of place.

- (3) *Gallos ab Aquitanis Garumna flumen, a Belgis Matrona et Sequana dividit. **Horum** omnium fortissimi sunt Belgae.*
The Garonne separates the Gauls from the Aquitanians, and the Marne and Seine from the Belgians. Of these the Belgians are the strongest.
- (4) ***Caesari** [first occurrence of the name in the BG] cum id nuntiatum esset, maturat ab urbe proficisci.*
When this was reported to Caesar, he made hast to leave town.

1.3 A few tendencies concerning subject and predicate

- subjects, esp. proper names, prefer head position; if this is taken up by a more prominent constituent, they will usually take final position.
- in a few cases, the predicate is more common in head position: commands and exhortations, reassuring statements, contrasts, narrative continuation from previous sentence, etc.

(5) *Malum mihi videtur esse mors.*

Death, or so it seems to me, is a nuisance.

(6) *Apud Helvetios longe nobilissimus fuit et ditissimus Orgetorix.*

In the ranks of the Helvetii, by far the noblest and richest was Orgetorix.

(7) *Favere and cupere Domnorigem Helvetiis, odisse etiam suo nomine Caesarem et Romanos nuntiabant.*

They reported that Dumnorix favoured the Helvetii and wished them well, and that he hated Caesar and the Romans on his own account.

1.4 Set phrases

There are a few set phrases, usually official designations and appellations, which are not changed. A few examples: *Iuppiter Optimus Maximus – di immortales – pontifex maximus; tribunus plebis/plebi/militum/militaris; senatus consultum – plebis scitum; aes alienum – res familiaris; res gestae; populus Romanus*

1.5 Hyperbaton

A common feature of Latin is the hyperbaton, i.e. the separation of two words which belong together syntactically. Particularly common is the separation of these two members of a phrase by pronouns and other enclitics (*autem, enim, igitur, quoque*) and some prepositions (e.g. *magna cum laude*). There are no restrictions, however, regarding which class of words/constituents may be the interrupting agent.

(8) *Quorum et tu frequentiam videre et studia perspicere potuisti.*

You too were able to see their sheer mass and consider their efforts.

(9) *Mea me voluntas prohibuit.*

My wish/decision forbids it to me.

(10) *Si quid est in me ingeni...*

If there is anything clever in me ...

2 Periodic structure

The order of clauses within any complex, hypotactic sentence (or period) is determined by a variety of factors: style of the author (historic or rhetoric), type of subordinate clause, logical sequence, etc. A few rough guidelines:

- concessive, conditional and most temporal clauses are placed before the main clause
 - this is not the case for posterior *dum*-clauses; contrary to logical sequence, however, *priusquam*-/ *antequam*-clauses commonly do fall in this slot
- relative, consecutive, comparative and purpose clauses commonly follow the main clause, as do indirect questions
- this does not apply, of course, for connective relatives or other relative clauses containing important information; further, temporal clauses of little importance are often postponed

A few notes on coincidence of subject/object in main and subordinate clauses:

- if subject of main and preposed subordinate clause are the same, the subject will usually occur sentence-initially, before the conjunction introducing the subordinate clause
- the same is true for a constituent of the main clause that is also a constituent of the subordinate clause
- if the main clause subject is a non-subject constituent of the subordinate clause, it still occurs in head position, and is represented within the subordinate clause by an appropriate pronoun
- if the object of the main clause is the subject of the subordinate clause, it stands before the subordinate clause, and no explicit mention of the subject is made in that clause

(11) *Caesar postquam in Treveros venit, Rhenum transire constituit.*
Caesar, before going to Trier, decided to cross the Rhine.

(12) *Fratres Litavici cum comprehendi iussisset, paulo ante repperit ad hostes fugisse.*
When he ordered the brothers of Litavicus to be arrested, he discovered that they had fled a short time before to the enemy.

(13) *In ‘Gorgia’ Socrates, cum esset ex eo quesitum, Archelaum Perdiccae filium beatum putaret, “Haud scio”, inquit, “numquam enim cum eo collocutus sum”.*
In the Gorgias, Socrates, when he was asked, whether he thought Archelaos, the son of Perdicca, was beautiful, answered: “I don’t know, for I have never spoken to him”.

(14) *Pompeius Cretensibus, cum ad eum usque in Pamphyliam legatos deprecatoresque misissent, spem deditionis non ademit.*
Pompey did not deprive the Cretans of their hope for a capitulation, since they had sent emissaries and intercessors to him, all the way to Pamphylia.