VERB-SUBJECT ORDER IN MALTESE

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INTRODUCTION

In the Maltese language, as well as in other modern Arabic dialects, the normal order of words in a sentence is strikingly different from classical Arabic.[1] In the classical language and in the conservative literary Arabic of today, the unmarked word order is verb first, subject second. One way to test which word order is 'unmarked' is to see what form we get as an answer to a very neutral question like 'What happened'? Thus, in literary Arabic we have

1. *Madha hadatha? — Ishtara Muhammad^{un} — kitab^{an}* (After Bakir 1979:6)
   what happened? — bought Mohammed-nom. — book-acc.
   'What happened? Mohammed bought a book.'

The subject, *muhammad* comes after the verb, *?ištaraa*. The opposite is true in Maltese. The most common answer to 'What happened?' has the subject preceding the verb:

2. *X' ġara? — Muhammed xtara — ktieb.*
   what happened? — Mohammed bought — book.
   'What happened? Mohammed bought a book.'

However, there are many contexts in Maltese where verb-subject (VS) order is still possible along with subject-verb (SV) order. And in some cases, VS order is still obligatory. The purpose of this paper is to survey the kinds of VS constructions found in Maltese, and to offer an explanation for their persistence in what is primarily 'an SV language'.

Our explanation is formulated in terms of the concepts of *link* and *advance*. We believe that in normal connected discourse every proposition includes an element that ties it to what has already been communicated, or to something that is so well known it need not even be referred to. We call this element a *link*. It constitutes

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[1] A version of this paper was presented at the 1980 meeting of the Canadian Linguistic Association in Montreal.

a reference to old information. The main purpose of each proposition, however, is to add to the existing store of information, not merely to repeat it. Hence propositions include an *advance*, the new information tied to its context by the link. In a sentence like *John broke the window, John* is the link: the sentence would not normally be uttered unless the audience were expected to already know who John is. The advance or new information is *broke the window*. (The terms link and advance are ours but the idea behind them is related to the work of linguists like Firbas (1971), Halliday (1967-8), Chafe (1976) and others.)

The hypothesis we wish to prove here is the following: *In Maltese, verb-subject order is possible only if the subject of the sentence is not the link.*

A SURVEY OF VS SENTENCE TYPES

The data for this study consisted of four spoken texts, identified according to their authors as follows: GB — Gużepp il-Bidwi, age 90, of Birkirkara, SH — Salvu il-Haddied, age 89, of Gharb, and DA — Dionisius Agius, one of the authors. Agius produced two texts; however, in neither case was he as yet aware that these texts would be put to the use they are receiving here. For literary material, we used *Hrejjef Missirijietna*, compiled by Manwel Magri, S.J., Malta: Problemi ta' Llum, 1967 (M), and we also used materials from the Sunday newspaper *It-Torċa* (T). (In the case of excerpts from this paper the date of the issue is given following the sentence quoted.) Finally, material marked (E) was elicited in isolation from any text.

For purposes of illustration we have selected a few examples of VS constructions, which we will classify by the grammatical category of the link. But first, let us look at the much more common SV sentence type, in which the link is most frequently the subject:

3. *Il-bieraħ — Ġanni — kiser — it-tieqa.* (E)
   yesterday — John — broke — the window.
   'Yesterday John broke the window.'

4. *Johnny Cash twieled — f' Arkansas — fis-26 — ta' Frar — 1932* (T/Feb. 24, 18)
   Johnny Cash was born — in Arkansas — on the 26th — of February

In both sentences, the subject, *Ġanni* and *Johnny Cash*, are the link and come first in the sentence. When the subject is the link, this is the only possible word order. We must turn to other kinds of link to illustrate VS order.

Object link

First, we consider sentences with an object link, as illustrated in examples 5 and 6. We concentrate on the direct object, though other kinds of object work similarly.

5. *Il-ḥajt — ma — kontux — tirran ġawḫ — íntom.* (SH)
   the wall — not — used to — fix — you.
   'The wall, you didn't used to fix.'

6. *Kompjutor — ma — tridúx.* (E)
   computer — not — you want.
   'A computer you don't want.'

In example 5, the context is that of one man talking to another about former methods of construction. 'The wall' had been referred to repeatedly. Hence the link of sentence 5, *il-ḥajt* 'wall' is highly contextually dependent. VS order would not occur here if 'wall' were new or unpredictable information. In that case we'd have a sentence like 7.

7. *Intom ma kontux tirran ġawḫ il-ḥájt.* (E)

Sentence 8 could also be uttered in the context of 5, with 'wall' contextually dependent, provided that *il-ḥajt* does not receive the main sentence stress. An example is sentence 8.

8. *Íntom ma kontux tirranġawḫ il-ḥajt.* (E)

Unless otherwise noted, SV order with stress shifted to the locus of the advance is possible in all VS examples that follow.

A variation of a VS sentence with object link is the object relative clause, where the object is expressed via the relative pronoun *li*. Examples of this are 9 and 10.

9. "*il-lejla,*" — *qaltlu — dína,* — "*iddúqx — l-ikel — li — tqegḫidlek — quddiemek — ómmok.*" (M37)
   the-night — said to him — that one — don't taste — the food — that — puts for you — in front of you — your mother
   '"Tonight," he said, "don't taste the food your mother serves you."'

10. *ḥekk — ukoll — faḫḫret — il-passi — kbar — 'il — qúddiem — li — ġḫamlet Malta f'dan — is-settúr*
    so — and all — praised — the-steps — great — towards — front — that — did Malta in this — the-sector   (T/Feb. 24, 15)
    'And so it (a visiting Chinese delegation) praised the great steps forward that Malta undertook in this sector.'

Adverbial link

The next type of VS clause is the kind with an adverbial, i.e. spatial, temporal, or modal expression serving as link. This is illustrated by examples 11, 12, and 13.

11. *Imbagḫad — toḫro ġ — il-purċissjóni* (DA)
    then — emerges — the-procession
    'Then the procession emerges.'

12. *Dik — in-nhar — issajjar — fének — il-mara* (SH)
    that — the-day — cooks — rabbit — the-women
    'On that day my wife cooks a rabbit.'

13. *Il-lejla — míetet — il-mara* (GB)
    the-night — died — the-woman
    'Tonight my wife died.'

    Il-banda — toḫroġ — qisu — fil-ḫámsa. (DA)
    the-band — emerges — around — five o'clock

Examples 14 and 15 are common in narratives.

14. *U — bla — telf — ta' żmien — raġa' — x-xíḫ* (M73)
    and — without — loss of time — started — the-old man
    'And the old man started right away'

15. *U — ḥekk — ġḫamlet — ómmu.* (M42)
    and — so — did — his mother
    'And so his mother did it.'

The link here is an adverbial phrase expressing manner: 'without loss of time', 'and so'. Such a link is used to move the narrative forward into a new stage, and the sentence may serve as a kind of headline. For example, sentence 15 comes after a thief had explained to the mother how to kill her own son. What follows 15 is a description on how she carries out these instructions. Thus 15 heralds a new 'paragraph' (Longacre 1979). Using adverbial links like *u ḥekk* is a very old device and the VS order here may in part be due to the influence of archaic models of narration.

In *adverbial clauses* the information conveyed by the subject is not less new than that given by the verb, hence VS order is possible after conjunctions like *meta* 'when':

16. *Meta — spiċċat — il-lieva,* — *huwa — żżewweġ — lil — Vivien Liberto — minn — San António ...* (T/Feb. 24, 18)
    when — she-ended — the-draft — he — married — to — Vivien Liberato — from — San Antonio.

17. *Meta — rat — ix-xiħa — s-Sultán — sellmítlu.* (E)
when — saw — the-old woman — the-King — saluted him
'When the old woman saw the King she saluted him.'

Verbal link

By far the most prevalent and perhaps the most interesting type of VS clause is the kind with a verbal link. For purely illustrative purposes we have subdivided our examples into several recurring types. First, clauses with an indefinite subject. These are illustrated by examples 18 and 19. Here SV order is not possible even with stress shift: 20 and 21 are ungrammatical. This is not surprising, since an indefinite noun is by definition new in its context. We found one exception though: examples 22 and 23 are both possible. Perhaps this is due to the fact that these expressions may have been imported wholesale from Sicilian or Italian, if not English.

Maltese does not like indefinite subjects such as those in the above examples, all of which were obtained by elicitation. In the texts all indefinite subjects were introduced via existential or quasi-existential predicates, which we discuss next.

Existential predicates consist of the demonstrative *ħemm* 'there', preceded by a form of the auxiliary *kien* 'be', except in the present tense where there is no 'be' element. This is shown in examples 24, 25, and 26. As the predicate in these cases contributes almost nothing new to the communication, the VS order here, too, is obligatory.

18. *Hemm hekk — jaħdem — rágel* (E)
there so — works — man
'A man is working there' (and he . . .)

19. *Qam — kelliem — biex — jaqra — kárta.* (E)
rose — speaker — to — read — paper
'A speaker stood up to read a paper.'

20. **Raġel jaħdem hemm hekk.*

21. **Kelliem qam biex jaqra karta.*

*Ideja ġietni.

22. *Ġratli — ħaġa — interessánti* (E)
happened to me — thing — interesting
'An interesting thing happened to me'.

23. *Ħaġa — interessánti — ġrátli.* (E)

24. *Kien — ħemm — darba — wieħed — żagħżúgħ — li — jħobb 'l — ommu — daqs — id-dawl — ta' — għajnejh.* (M35)
was — there — once — one — young man — who — loves — to — his mother — like — the-light — of — his eyes
'Once upon a time there was a young man who loved his mother like (lit.) the light of his eyes.'

25. *ikun — ħemm — il-bejjiegħa* (DA)
will be — there — the-vendors
'There will be vendors.'

26. *Hemm — min — iżejjen — il-presépju — u — hemm — min — jagħmel — il-ġulbíena.* (DA)
there — who — decorates — the-crib — and — there — who — makes — the-sprouts.
'Some decorate the crib and others prepare the sprouts.'
(Referring to Maltese Christmas customs.)

Quasi-existential predicates present the subject not merely as existing but as having come into existence over time. Here too we get obligatory VS order. This type of construction, illustrated in examples 27 and 28 is particularly characteristic of news reporting.

27. *Bdew — it-taħditiet — bejn — delegazzjoni — mill-Federazzjóni — u — delegazzjoni — mill-MFÁ* (T/Feb. 24, 25)
started — the-discussions — between — delegation — from-Federation — and — delegation — from-MFA
'A delegation from the Federation and a delegation from the MFA started discussion.'

28. *Twaqqfet — għaqda — internazzjonáli — biex — tikkoraġġixxi — rivoluzzjonijiet — barra — r-Rússja* (T/Mar 2 20)
came into existence — group — international — to — encourages — revolutions — outside — the-Russia
'An international group was established to encourage revolutions outside Russia.'

Next, we have VS clauses where the verb expresses the appearance on the scene of a new subject, as in 29-30.

29. *U — ġew — l-Inglíżi* (DA)
and — came — the-English

30. *Waslet — il-ġurnáta — u — s-Sultan — kellu — jibgħat — lill-imsejkna — tífla* (M44)
arrived — the-day — and — the-King — had — sent — to the-poor girl

'The day arrived and the King sent for the poor girl.'

In this case the order is not obligatory; if the subject is contextually given it may come first. For example, 31 could occur when we have been talking about the English, or expected them, the new information is that they have arrived.

31. *U l-Ingliżi ġew.*

Finally, VS word order occurs in quoting clauses like 32, 33, and the unusual two-verb example, 34.

32. 'X', — *qal — lil — dik — il-mara — l-ħallfel* (M38)
    'X', — said — to — that — the-woman — the-thief
    '"X", said the thief to that woman.'

33. *Qabeż — il-kbir:* 'X' (M56)
    interrupt — the-elder
    'The elder interrupted, "X".'

34. *Qabeż — ix-xiħ\— qál, — lil. — dak — li — għamel — ix-xini* (M75)
    interrupted — the-old man — said — to — that one — that — made the-galley
    'The old man interrupted and said that he had made the galley for him.'

Here the verb clearly adds little to the communication; what matters is the tagging of a participant as the speaker of the quote.

To recapitulate, we have found VS word order in clauses with an object link, and adverbial link, and a verbal link. We divided the VS clauses with a verbal link as follows: clauses with an indefinite subject and with an existential or quasi-existential predicate, clauses reporting the appearance of a new participant, and quoting clauses. Only when the subject was not the link did we get obligatory subject-verb order.[2]

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[2]We have found two possible exceptions, given below as 35 and 36. *Bin is-Sultan* in 35 and *dik* in 36 seem to be old information, and should be the link. Yet they follow the verb.

35. *Telaq — immela — bin — is-Sultán — mingħand — missieru* (M61)
    left — then — son — the-King — from place — from his father
    'Then the King's son left his father's place.'

36. *Kitbet — dik — għal daqshekk — ittra* (M54)
    wrote — that one — for that reason — letter
    'For that reason she wrote a letter.'

We feel that the order here is due to the position of these sentences in the story. Both announce new developments, as did the adverbial-phrase

EXPLANATION

If we have succeeded in proving that VS order occurs only when the subject is not the link, then it behoves us now to offer an explanation. Why did word order change to mostly SV from mostly VS in many modern Arabic dialects including Maltese? And why does optional and even obligatory VS order persist in Maltese when the subject is not the link of the sentence?

On the basis of numerous reports on various languages that have been published in the literature (Bolinger 1954, Firbas 1971, Hetzron 1975, Givón 1976), we may take it for granted that the distinction between link and advance is expressed in word order. Let us now take the ideal situation in which word order is completely determined by this distinction. We would then have one of the following word orders as the only possibility in the language:

(37) advance link
(38) link advance

It seems likely that the link-first order (37) makes it much easier to process communication as decoding here follows the 'natural' left-right order of encoding (cf. Firbas 1971: 138).

Because VS order has the verb first and the most likely place for the link is also the initial position, a language with VS order would have to resort to some special devices whenever the verb is not the link. The most obvious is stress; we would in such cases expect the main sentence stress on the first, the verbal element.

An SV language has its problems, too, this time when the link is other than the subject. Again, various devices may develop to deal with this problem. Stress is one. In Maltese the main sentence stress may often be shifted to whatever element is the locus of the advance, without the need for changed word order. Another possibility, however, is to reverse the order of the subject and the verb. Dummy demonstratives like *hemm* 'there' in existential pre-

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sentences 14 and 15. In 35 the plot moves on to the prince's adventures after his predictable departure from the palace. In 36 the story had so far told of the unjust incarceration of a woman. Now there is a turning point in her hopes for liberation, as she has just gotten the idea to communicate with the outside world by tying a letter around the neck of a carrier pigeon. The *paragraph-initial* (in Longacre's sense) word order here may be VS by analogy to text-initial order, which is often VS by virtue of an existential predicate or an indefinite subject. Alternatively, we might be witness to an archaizing tendency in written narrative; we have found no examples like these in any other genre.

dicates (cf. Engl. *there is*, Fr. *il y a*, Dutch *er is*) may then fill the usual position of the subject at the beginning of the sentence.

Although both SV and VS order may conflict with the optimal pragmatic order, link-advance, SV does so less often. This is because in most cases the subject is the link, and in SV order the subject is in the initial, 'linking' position. This is one reason why VS languages are unstable and tend to change towards a VS order. (The cross-linguistic evidence in support of this tendency is summarized in Givon 1979, ch. 7 and *passim*.)

In Arabic, of course, the change can be attested. Now if the motivation for this change is to put the subject link where it belongs pragmatically, that is in initial position, then it follows that a subject that is *not* the link would be the last to make the shift. In other words constructions with a subject link would become SV first, and those where some other element is the link would resist the change to SV order for a longer period of time. Maltese has already made the shift to SV where it matters, i.e. where the subject is the link. But the shift has not yet become obligatory in constructions linked through another element. This is the diachronic justification for the basic position of this paper: that VS order occurs if and only if the subject is not the link.

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