

MEANINGFUL WORD ORDER IN SPANISH

In this article I shall tentatively outline a theory of Spanish word order in accordance with the general principles of Linear Modification set forth in the article of the same name¹.

Explanations of why speakers prefer one sequence over another are many and varied. Gili Gaya speaks of a "synthetic" versus an "analytical" style in reference to adjectives and nouns, and, is alone in recognizing a similar tendency in phrases with the gerundio². Numerous grammars offer a principle of "longest element last" in reference to subject and verb. Others call attention to the "poetic" effect of putting adjectives before their nouns. Supposing that such principles are true as far as they apply, it is still the linguist's job to suspect the presence of some underlying force that thies them together. Symptoms are comparatively easy to discern, in semantics as in medicine; what is not so easy is to coordinate the symptoms into a pattern.

We must begin by distinguishing between two manifestations of sentence order, "free" and "petrified". The latter comprises combinations where the speaker has little or no choice: **Lo** hardly become **Hago lo** in modern Spanish; **entre los dos**, *c* come **los dos entre**. In them there is no question of what combination would "mean", since only one combination main instances of free order are the following:

1. Subject-verb: **Juan trabaja, Trabaja Juan.**
2. Verb-object: **Vi a Juan, A Juan lo vi.**
3. Adjective-noun: **Roja alba, Alba roja.**

¹ *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, LXVII:7, México, 1943, 171. Dec. 1952, 1117-1144. ² *Curso superior de sintaxis española*.

4. Adverb-verb: **Bien** lo sabe, **Lo** sabe bien.
5. Coordinate-coordinate: **Juan y María**, **María y Juan**.
6. Superordinate-subordinate: **Lo** mato si lo veo, **Si lo veo lo mato**.

Actually the first four classes, or at least the third and fourth, could be made subsidiary to the sixth; but it is so customary to treat subject-verb and adjective-noun as classes to themselves that it is more convenient to treat all six as equals, and limit the sixth to phrases and clauses.

The second step is to distinguish three manifestations of stress, which we may call alliteratively "petrified", "prosodic", and "passionate". Petrified stress is the phonemic stress by which *habló* is differentiated from *hablo*; we shall not be concerned with it. Prosodic stress is that which occurs normally in the second element of the phrases *roja álba* and *alba rója*, **Bien lo sábe** and **Lo sabe bién**, etc. It is often referred to as "sentence stress", and has been thought by some to be an automatic component of the sentence just as the stress in *habló* is an automatic component of the word, and hence to be essentially different from the contrastive stress on **Juan** in **Juán lo dice**, no **Eduardo**. Prosodic stress is the one we shall be concerned with here, in its interrelationships with free position, and I hope to show that it is not altogether automatic, but akin to the stress on **Juan** in the last example. The third stress, which I have labeled *passionate*, is evidenced in *esa maldita casa*; our emotions about a particular thing at times cause us to distort the "logical" stress that it normally carries. We shall not be concerned with *passionate* stress. It must be admitted, however, that there is no sharp dividing line between prosodic and *passionate*—where prosodic stress highlights something considered "important", it is to that extent *passionate*. But the two can be separated clearly enough to make discussing one without the other significant.

Two cautions before continuing. First, "free" is not to be taken in an absolute sense. Just as a rigid convention determines the order of *entre los dos*, so the intent of the speaker determines the order of *alba roja*. The difference between the two is not that one is determined and the other not, but that one is determined wholly by convention while the other is determined, within certain limits, by a meaning which the speaker wishes to convey. It is precisely this determining intent or meaning that we are called upon to track down. Second, rigid convention and a speaker's forethought are only two of the several ingredients of sentence order, which is proba-

bly the chief reason why the forethought has escaped detection. In any long sentence a good deal has to be crowded in, and there are only two directions in which it can be done, fore and aft; when a long modifier of incidental importance is inserted, or when a speaker bethinks himself of something to add in the course of saying what he had intended to say, the more systematic ordering of elements will be disrupted. On this account what I hope to demonstrate here will not explain everything; where it can be seen best will be in relatively short groups, in which the ordering of the elements visibly proceeds along the lines of the preexisting linguistic pattern which the speaker carries in his head.

1. Subject-verb. Imagine a store with merchandise for sale. One clerk notices that a certain article is gone, and asks a second about it. The second replies *Lo compró algún señor viejo*. In a store-situation, buying and selling is the regular thing, and consequently *Lo compró* offers nothing unexpected or especially informative; the identity of the buyer, however, was not predictable, and *algún señor viejo* is accordingly a new and unexpected datum.

Imagine, in contrast, a private home in which things are not normally offered for sale. A visitor calls, and notes the absence of a piece of furniture that had been there before. He asks what became of it, and receives the reply *Algún señor viejo lo compró*. The fact of the article's having been sold is now the most unexpected datum, and the sentence reverts to the more usual subject-verb order—probably reflecting the fact that if an action is performed, someone has to perform it, whence subjects (particularly indefinite ones) are presupposed.

Imagine someone asking *¿Por qué no se puede usar papel para taparlo?* Of the two answers *Porque el papel se rasga* and *Porque se rasga el papel* the former is more likely—'paper' has been mentioned and is accordingly presupposed, but what happens to the paper is a new, unpredicted, and contrastive datum (what happens when in the second example *rasga* is loud-stressed and *papel* is de-stressed we shall examine later). But if the question had been *¿Cómo no terminaste la carta?* the answer *Es que se rasgó el papel* would be if anything more likely than *Es que el papel se rasgó*, since the reference to the paper as a cause is unexpected.

In answer to the question *¿Por qué se ven tantos paquetes por aquí?* the form *Los dejó olvidados el cartero* would be more likely than *El cartero los dejó olvidados*. Since the packages are in a place where they should not be, it is to be supposed that someone left them

there, and consequently *Los dejó olvidados* is less new and informative than the identity of the person responsible.

I have chosen examples in which the situation could be carefully defined in order to illustrate something that might have been more easily illustrated with a simpler set of examples. It is easy to see the operation of the principle in the pairs “¿Quién trabaja?”—“Trabaja Juan” and “¿Qué hace Juan?”—“Juan trabaja”, because the element presupposed has already appeared verbatim in the preceding question and the new or contrasting element has not. It is more difficult to trace a “presupposition” that is present by implication but not explicitly; yet we see the same principle at work: that which is presupposed, but needs to be stated in order to clarify or remind, precedes; that which is new, unexpected, informative, and contrastive follows. The “point” of the utterance is toward the end.

I used the qualification “needs to be stated” because a good part of the time the element that is presupposed is not uttered at all. Thus it is superfluous to answer ¿Quién trabaja? with *Trabaja Juan*—normally it is sufficient to say merely *Juan*. An here is another reason why the underlying principle has gone unnoticed—it most obvious in the kind of sentence that is least frequent. Most of the time a presupposed element will not be expressed unless it has to be captured from an environment that implies but does not explicate it, or from an environment that only vaguely implies something of the general class of which the actual element is a specific.

To repeat: the normal thing is that a presupposed element that is clearly understood will not be uttered, while one that is not clearly understood will be uttered and will precede; the non-presupposed element, or “point”, will always be uttered, and when it combines with the presupposed one it normally follows.

But sometimes, for special effects, a presupposed element, even a lengthy one, is repeated though specifically known from the immediate context. Thus in answer to ¿Quién lo dice? one may find simply *Yo*, or, *Quien lo dice soy yo* alternating with *Yo soy quien lo dice* (*digo*). We may call such a verbatim or near-verbatim presupposed element a “resumptive”, and we find that resumptives offer a free choice between the two orders of words, with the principal difference between them being what is conveyed by the difference in intonation. *Quien lo dice soy yo* has loud rising-falling stress at the end, and partakes of the firmness of that characteristic intonation contour: it would be suitable, e.g., in a sharp rebuke, and could hardly be used if the intent were kindly or humorous. *Yo soy quien lo*

dice (*digo*) has its loud stress at the beginning followed by a fall that is first fairly abrupt and then gradual. Its mood is one of tension-relaxation, and is suitable for (though does not necessarily imply) a humorous or kindly intent. Inasmuch as most resumptives do not need to be uttered at all, it is not surprising that one purpose of their utterance is to create an intonation contour that otherwise could not be managed for lack of a sufficient number of syllables.

To clarify the difference between resumptives and other prosodically unstressed elements, let us look again at one of the preceding examples. In answer to *¿Por qué se ven tantos paquetes por aquí?* It would be unusual if not impossible to say *El cartero los dejó olvidados* with loud stress on *cartero* and the remainder de-stressed. But if the question were *¿Quién dejó olvidados todos estos paquetes?* the answer might readily be the one, intonation and all, that could not be used before. We conclude that a prosodic stress followed by non-stress implies that the non-stressed element is a resumptive, while the more normal arrangement, where prosodic stress is preceded by non-stress implies that the non-stressed element inheres in the total situation and is presupposed or at any rate non-contrastive, and may or may not be resumptive. In other words, an element which is explicitly resumptive comes after prosodic stress.

A resumptive need not be verbatim. Sometimes it is paraphrased. In answer to *¿Cómo sabías que se entregaría la mercancía a tiempo?* one might have *Mis amigos me dieron la noticia*, with prosodic stress on *amigos*. What follows is resumptive: *noticia = que se entregaría la mercancía a tiempo*; in place of the repeated clause there is a surrogate noun. Observe now the incongruousness of putting, in the position of *noticia*, some noun which cannot serve as a surrogate: *Mis amigos me dieron su palabra*—here, if we attempt to de-stress *palabra* as we de-stressed *noticia*, the effect is jarring. On the other hand, if *palabra* is given prosodic stress, the utterance is normal. Since 'promise' is new to the context, and is the "point" of the utterance, it must have prosodic stress.

This gives us a clue to the function of normal prosodic stress in the Spanish sentence; this stress, as is well known, comes toward the end of the breath group. The stress marks the point of the utterance, that portion of it which answers the question (asked or implicit) uppermost in the minds of the interlocutors. The contrastive, new, informative element tends to follow, and with it goes the prosodic stress. This norm enables the speaker to choose between which gram-

matical segment he chooses to highlight, subject or verb, by putting now one, now the other, in the position of stress³.

One matter remains to be disposed of in connexion with subject verb order: the notion of longest-element-last. Measuring sentences by the yard we should probably find that in the main the longest element does come last. But if my argument is right, it does not come last because it is long, but it tends to be long for the same reason that it comes last, viz., because it is a new datum. One of our elementary grammars gives *¿Tiene una mesa el alumno?* as an example of a relatively long subject following the verb and its object. Now if *el alumno* had been known between both speakers to be the subject, it would probably not have been mentioned; the sentence would have been simply *¿Tiene una mesa?* The fact that it is there at all suggests that it is a new datum, and it follows because it is new, not because it is long. Obviously in answer to *¿Qué hace en la tienda a estas horas aquel señor de la barba larga, los zapatos negros y el traje gris?* the interlocutor is not going to repeat the whole description; it is now a resumptive, and will be abbreviated, replaced by

³ It can be argued that many sentences in Spanish do not reveal any necessary emphasis of one part over the other, that in answer to *¿Cómo perdiste el anillo?*, for example, one might as readily find *Lo hurtó algún pillo* as *Algún pillo lo hurtó*. In the first, according to the principle, the concept of 'perdiste' is taken to suggest a theft, with the result that 'hurtó' is presupposed; in the second, 'hurtó' is not taken as implied by 'perdiste' but as a new datum. But as far as a speaker is concerned there might be occasions when either element is equally contrastive. The answer to the argument is that this is only one of many instances where the language forces its speakers into an either-or choice. Another such instance is the contrast between perfective *Lo vi salir* and imperfective *Lo vi saliendo*. The speaker may be indifferent to the distinction, but he nevertheless has to choose one or the other. In all probability he is never totally indi-

fferent to the distinction, and picks the one toward which he leans however slightly. The fact that this leaning may be almost infinitely slight is another explanation of why the real semantic contrast has escaped detection. It also explains why the catchall explanation of "euphony" is so often invoked. It is worth repeating, for the benefit of those who call upon euphony to explain phenomena like the one under consideration here, that we do not say things because they are euphonious, but they are euphonious because we say them. What a writer does may to a fair extent be conditioned by euphony, because he is able to go back over his text and cull out unwanted repetitions and other cacophonies; but the speaker is guided by more vigorously functioning linguistic and semantic frames. Part of the over-stress on euphony is conceivably due to the literary orientation of much linguistic research.

a pronoun, or omitted altogether. To repeat: long elements usually come last because they are usually contrastive, not because they are long⁴.

The order subject-verb predominates over the order verb-subject in Spanish, but this statistical fact is not to be interpreted mechanically. In a given discourse one actor is more likely to carry through a series of different and hence contrastive actions in any given setting the actors are more stable, relatively speaking, that their actions; the actors are therefore more readily presupposed, while their actions are more unpredictable and hence more contrastive.

2. Verb-object. The same principle operates here, but, is partly obscured by another powerful tendency in word order, that of arranging elements according to time. When we say *Entró y se sentó* we do not put *se sentó* last because it is necessarily more contrastive but because it occurs *after entró*. Similarly the preponderance of the order action-goal is probably due in part at least to our viewing the action as terminating in the object, and hence as preceding it in time. But instances like *Cada centavo que ganó lo jugó* in answer to *¿Cómo llegó a su actual estado?* are common enough and prove that here, too the point of the utterance (in this example 'gambling') comes last. Furthermore, the passive voice enables the speaker to invert at will in order to get the action at the end: *Los enemigos fueron derrotados* makes 'derrota' the point; *Derrotaron a sus enemigos* makes 'enemigos' the point.

3. Adjective-noun. This is the phenomenon of word order that has been commented on most in Spanish, probably because the units, unlike those of subject-plus-modifiers and verb-plus-modifiers, are

⁴ It is possible, of course, that Spanish is witnessing one of those linguistic petrifications that occur periodically along the course of every language. We find, to start with, an order determined by the contrast presupposed-contrastive. Purely by accident this order coincides most of the time with the contrast short-long. In the course of time speakers reinterpret a semantic principle into a mechanical one, and the determinante actually turns out to be the contrast short-long. Exactly this has happened with the conjunctive

pronouns: *Lo tengo* is mechanical determinant, whereas formerly speakers were free to say *Tengo lo* and their choice was undoubtedly then determined by meaning. English has already experienced a shift from semantic to mechanical determinants in the order subject-verb (in its remaining zones of freedom the same general principles of presupposition and contrast apply as in Spanish), and Spanish may yet undergo it, but the petrification has not proceeded far enough to outweigh at this date the factor of meaning.

short and the contrasts achieved by altering the sequence are striking.

Yet adjective-noun order has evolved farther toward being mechanically determined than has subject-verb order. Only descriptive adjectives, in the main, are free to roam, and even they stand far more often in one position than in the other. In part, the mechanization of adjective order is due to the relative superfluousness of descriptive adjectives in any but a defining or contrastive sense. Most of the time when we use the word *rojo* it is not to paint a picture but to discriminate one object that is red from others that are not. And if this is true of single descriptive adjectives, it is cumulatively true of grouped descriptive adjectives only the story-teller has much use for two or three descriptive adjectives all modifying one noun at the same time. One result of this is that afterthoughtive parentheses make up a high percentage of all grouped adjectives the type *El tibio, suave y soñoliento atardecer nos adormecía* is outnumbered by *El atardecer, tibio, suave y soñoliento* (or, with the parenthesis in better balance, *El tibio atardecer, suave y soñoliento*).

But in combinations of noun plus single descriptive adjective the principle of presupposed-first and contrastive-last still operates. In *casa roja* the adjective narrows the reference of the noun; in *roja casa* the noun narrows the reference of the adjective (as Gili Gaya points out, the same applies to appositives: *madre viuda* vs. *viuda madre*). Furthermore, when there are no parentheses a series will 'give step-by-step narrowings: *vino rojo italiano* is primarily about 'vino rojo' narrowed, for this particular occasion, to 'vino rojo' which happens to be 'italiano'; while *vino italiano rojo* is primarily about 'vino italiano' narrowed, for this particular occasion, to 'rojo'. The more adventitious and contrastive the adjective, the more it moves toward the end.

Prosodic stress functions as with subject-verb. In *casa roja* the normal loud stress is on *roja*; in *roja casa* it is on *casa*. If in *casa roja* the stress falls on *casa*, we know again, exactly as with subject-verb, that *roja* is a resumptive (No he dicho "cási roja" sino cása roja). What we are most unlikely to find, unless with passionate stress, is *roja casa* with stress on *roja* and *casa* de-stressed⁵.

⁵ What follows a passionate stress is not so completely de-stressed as is an ordinary resumptive. Another example is ***Pero si hay perfecto acuerdo entre la gente aquí***, with passionate stress on *acuerdo*, spoken as a lively protest against someone

who has maintained a view that the existence of an 'acuerdo' refutes. Instead of an abrupt drop in pitch on the last syllable of *acuerdo*, such as one would have with a resumptive, the tonal curve descends more gradually.

What gives the obvious poetic flavor to a pre-posed descriptive adjective? The answer to this is the same as to why descriptive adjectives are not often pre-posed: the poet sees things in qualitative terms—a color 'red' is likely to be, for him, predominant, while the particular objects which are red may in his poetic mood be secondary. So for the poet the color is sometimes presupposed and the things which carry the color are then adventitious, unpredictable, and contrastive. In the practical world the reverse is true. We can set up the same opposition of stability-instability for noun-adjective as for subject-verb: the noun, or thing, is more likely to be durable, and to take on in the course of its existence the accidents of poses (verbs) and qualities (adjectives). This does not mean that all pre-posed adjectives are poetic. The speaker is free to put an adjective first whenever it pleases him to imply that the meaning of that adjective is presupposed: *deliciosas comidas, hermosa hija, malos consejos, infernal ruido*, etc., illustrate the circumstance of being complimentary or uncomplimentary in Spanish, where presupposition is the rule.

4. Adverb-verb. The contrast between *Furiosamente atacaron* and *Atacaron furiosamente* is the same as that between *furioso ataque* and *ataque furioso*. When the modifier follows, it is the new, unpredicted, or adventitious datum; when it precedes, it is presupposed and overspreading, and the modified verb or noun is then the narrowing and contrasting element. The same occurs with non-descriptive adverbs: *Ayer llegó* tells what happened yesterday; *Llegó ayer* tells when the arrival took place.

In the type *Felizmente lo comprendieron todo* (which transposed with parenthesis, gives *Lo comprendieron todo, felizmente*) we have the equivalent of "Es cosa feliz que..." The broad, all-enveloping judgment precedes, and the event is narrowing and definitive.

5. Coordinate-coordinate. Where two elements are of equal status and joined by *y*, it should make no difference which comes first. And it is here, as one might expect, that factors other than the ones under consideration are most likely to sway the choice. There is, first, temporal sequence: *ayer y hoy, leer y escribir, llegué y me senté, primero y segundo*, etc., are not ordinarily reversed. Second, stereotyped sequences which may have, partially, phonetic causes (more sonorous word gravitating into position of stress): English *pick and shovel*, Spanish *picos y vagonetas*⁶ (in these the order of use may

⁶ I am indebted for this example, and of my own inventions, to my colleague for numerous others, besides criticism Dr. Laudelino Moreno.

influence). Third, social dictates: señoras y señores (as against hombres y mujeres). Probably the order tends to be fossilized whenever two things are frequently juxtaposed.

It becomes accordingly harder to find examples of the sort of thing we want. Certain combinations, nevertheless, seem to exhibit it, with a tendency toward the general principle of more probable or more inclusive (broader) first vs. less probable or less inclusive (narrower) last. The order *sortijas y pendientes* is more usual than *pendientes y sortijas*; *soldados y marino*, *ración de pan y agua* ('bread' is to be expected in practically any ration, but 'water' stands in contrast with all the other things that might combine with bread), *por tierra y por mar* from the standpoint of the landsman, *mesas y sillas*, *café y crema* (the explicit subordination in *café con crema*, as against *crema con café*, comes to mind), *crema y azúcar*, *pan y mantequilla*, are more likely than the inverse order. Frequently the second element is what typifies the combination. In *el acero es una mezcla de hierro y carbono* we refer to iron as the main ingredient but carbon as what differentiates ordinary iron or other alloys from steel carbon is contrastive. Of course, there is a possibility of temporal sequence here, too: "*First* you take your iron, *and then* you add some carbon". But we can imagine a case where the temporal sequence is reversed: suppose that in making a certain kind of readed glass the lead is first fused and then the sand is added; despite the change in the order of operations, *arena y plomo* would be the more likely arrangement sand is presupposed for glass, and lead is the contrastive marker of a particular variety?

6. Superordinate-subordinate. In *Cuando murió su esposa, él murió* the situational 'when his wife died' covers not only time, but also suggests cause. In *él murió cuando murió su esposa* the temporal clause is now only temporal. In both cases the first element is broad and situational, the second is narrow and specific. In *leyendo aprendemos* one infers learning as an incidental benefit, among other conceivable benefits (such as entertainment) to be had by reading; in *aprendemos leyendo* one infers reading as one of the possible ways of learning, among other possible ways such as writing

⁷ This raises the question of "importance". It is often maintained that the important member of a sequence tends to precede, and in a sense this is true; but one also hears that the important member is stressed, and here we see that the stress comes on the second

member, not the first. So "importance" in the abstract seems to carry little meaning. One member may be important in that it comes first to mind, while the other is important in that it sets the combinations part from other combinations.

and listening. In the first, reading is broader, learning narrower; in the second, learning is broader, reading narrower. In the first one describes *what* (the “point”) can be accomplished by *reading* (the “situation”); in the second one describes *what way* (the point) one can go about the general problem of *learning* (the situation). Note the association of the question-asking *qué* with the point of the utterance. We can frame it in so many words: “¿*Qué se puede hacer leyendo?*” “*Leyendo aprendemos*”. “*De qué manera se aprende?*”—“*Aprendemos leyendo*”.

7. Conclusions. It seems clear that the possibilities of free arrangement outlined here follow essentially the same pattern, which can be diagrammed as follows:

Sentence or phrase
Situation/Point/Resumptive

The situation sums up what is presupposed, overshadowing, non-contrastive, known from or attributed to the context. This potentially includes resumptives, but resumptives are only one of many situational possibilities. The point is the new, contrastive, narrow, typifying, unpredicted element, the ‘what’ of the utterance that focuses it, and is marked by prosodic stress. The resumptive is a verbatim or near-verbatim repetition of something from a preceding utterance, and is de-stressed.

No utterance is complete without a point. Possible complete utterances are then point alone, situation-point, point-resumptive, and situation-point-resumptive. Examples:

1. Point: “¿*Quién vino?*”—“*Juan*”.
2. Situation-point: “¿*Quién vino?*”—“*Si no me equivoco fué Juan*” (or, *Vino Juan*, with the situation a resumptive).
3. Point-resumptive: “¿*Quién vino?*”—“*Juan vino*”.
4. Situation-point-resumptive: “¿*Quién vino?*”—“*Si no me equivoco fué Juan quien vino*”.

In more complex sentences, we may find these three divisions of the sentence built up hierarchically. In the example *Cuando murió su esposa él murió* we can analyze the first clause separately and then the sentence as a whole:

First clause: *Cuando murió/ su esposa /*
 Situation Point Resumptive

Sentence: *Cuando murió u esposa / él / murió*
 Situation Point Resumptive

Such a hierarchy implies a parallel build-up of stresses, which is exactly what we find: the point of the sentence as a whole has a heavier prosodic stress than the point of the subordinated part⁸.

University of Southern California.

DWIGHT L. BOLINGER.

⁸ In order not to complicate matters I have left intonation largely out of account. This much needs to be said, however: that what is usually referred to as "contrastive stress" is rather contrastive intonation. For example, in the following exchange, "**Me pregunto qué habría pasado si mi hermano hubiera heredado esa fortuna**" — "Su hermano lo habría desperdiciado", hermano will get the usual stress that it gets in the situation but in addition (without necessarily increasing

the stress) it may receive a higher pitch, with the implication 'your brother by contrast with the person who actually did inherit'. The loudest stress is still on the point, *desperdiciado*, but the pitch of the point may be lower than the highest pitch of the situation. Investigators have sometimes confused high pitch with loud stress. The two are more often than not combined in the same syllable, but need not be.