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Basic Word Order
in *De Agricultura*

*Kirsten M Hanna*

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Abstract

Latin word order has been the subject of scholarly debate for centuries, yet the question is far from resolved. In terms of the basic order of the clause's core constituents, some analysts argue that the basic order is SOV, while others argue for SVO. Some scholars argue that basic order is determined primarily by pragmatic principles, others hold the view that order is primarily syntactically determined, and others suggest that both syntactic and pragmatic principles are in operation.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the debate on basic order in Latin and its determinants. Specifically, I examine the order of subject, object and verb in De agricultura, an agricultural manual written in the 2nd century BC. The study shows that the orders SV and OV are so overwhelmingly predominant that we are justified in labelling them as basic; indeed they are so common that we could argue that the order of these elements is relatively fixed. Departures from the basic order fall into two categories: those instances where a subject or object comes later in the clause than usual (i.e. after the verb) and those instances where they appear earlier in the clause than usual (i.e. in a fronting construction). It will be shown that there is a constellation of factors which must be taken into account to explain the distribution and function of these deviations, including the information status of a fronted or postposed NP's referent, its pragmatic function in the clause, and the function of the clause in structuring the discourse. In summary, I argue that in De agricultura there is a syntactically determined basic order for subject, object and verb, and that departures from the basic order are motivated by pragmatic factors, viz either (a) the need to draw attention to an NP's referent(s) for a specific discourse-structuring reason or (b) the positioning of certain 'focally heavy' information after light verbs.
Dedicated to Jan, Rhys and Simon,
who got me started and kept me going.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................. ii  
Acknowledgements ...................................................................................... iv  
Table of Contents ......................................................................................... v  
Abbreviations............................................................................................... x  

## CHAPTER 1: Introduction.................................................................................... 1  
1. The purpose of this study ....................................................................... 2  
2. Cato the Censor's *De agricultura* ............................................................. 3  
3. The structure of this thesis ..................................................................... 4  

## CHAPTER 2: Textual Integrity............................................................................. 7  
1. The current form of *De agricultura* .......................................................... 8  
2. Explanations for the current form of the text........................................... 11  
3. Conclusion ............................................................................................... 15  

## CHAPTER 3: Previous Studies on Latin Word Order........................................... 17  
Introduction............................................................................................... 18  
1. Typological approach: Adams (1976)..................................................... 20  
   1.1 Brief overview of Lehmann's theory ............................................... 20  
   1.2 The logical structure of Lehmann's model and its application .......... 23  
   1.3 Adams' application of Lehmann's typological model to Latin .......... 24  
   1.4 Criticisms of Lehmann's model ...................................................... 26  
   1.5 The ambivalence of SVO and the VO:OV split ............................... 28  
       1.5.1 The lack of exceptionless universals for SVO languages in Greenberg's data............................................................... 28  
       1.5.2 SVO is a “mixed” type ........................................................ 30  
   1.6 The position of Lehmann's model and predictive power of VO features..................................................................................... 31  
3. Functional Grammar............................................................................ 43  
   3.1 Introduction ............................................................................... 43  
   3.2 Topic and Focus .......................................................................... 45  
       3.2.1 Types of topic.................................................................... 46  
       3.2.2 Types of focus ................................................................... 47  
   3.3 Constituent ordering.................................................................... 48  
   3.4 Pinkster (1990)........................................................................... 51  
   3.5 Cabrillana (1996) and de Jong (1989)............................................ 53
CHAPTER 4: Basic Word Order

Introduction .............................................................................................. 60
1. Preliminaries ...................................................................................... 60
2. How to determine basic order ............................................................... 64
   2.1 Frequency .................................................................................. 64
   2.2 Markedness ................................................................................ 65
      2.2.1 Formal markedness ........................................................... 65
      2.2.2 Distributional markedness................................................... 66
      2.2.3 Pragmatic markedness ....................................................... 66
3. Conclusion ........................................................................................... 67

CHAPTER 5: Discourse Referents & Information Status

Introduction .............................................................................................. 70
1. Discourse referents ............................................................................. 70
   1.1 Karttunen's permanent and short-term referents ....................... 70
   1.2 Postverbal nominals in De agricultura ........................................ 72
2. Information status ................................................................................ 76
   2.1 A note on definiteness and indefiniteness ..................................... 76
   2.2 Information structure and information status .............................. 77
      2.2.1 Lambrecht's (1996) model of information status ............... 78
      2.2.2 Prince's (1992) model of information structure .................... 80
   2.3 Information status and nominals in De agricultura .................... 81
      2.3.1 When is a new discourse referent truly new? ..................... 82
      2.3.2 Partitives .......................................................................... 83

CHAPTER 6: The Position of O and V

Introduction: the position of objects .............................................................. 88
1. Preliminaries ...................................................................................... 88
   1.1 Clause types .............................................................................. 88
   1.2 Ellipsis ...................................................................................... 89
      1.2.1 The OVO pattern and ellipsis of the verb ............................... 89
      1.2.2 Ellipsis of coordinated object ............................................... 92
   1.3 Discourse environments ............................................................... 95
   1.4 Structure of recipes ................................................................. 97
      1.4.1 Alimentary, wine, preserving recipes .................................. 97
      1.4.2 Wine-based and medical/veterinary recipes ......................... 100
2. The position of lexical objects in De agricultura ................................ 101
3. Distribution of the VO and OVO orders in chapters 54-162 of De agricultura
............................................................................................................. 103
3.1 Chapter type .......................................................................................... 103
3.2 Distribution of VO according to chapter type ........................................ 104
4 The (O)VO orders in chapters 54-126, 128-155, 159-162 ....................... 106
4.1 Verbs of the semantic field 'add'............................................................ 106
  4.1.1 Recipes for preserving, wine-making, wine-based medicines
       and veterinary medicines ............................................................. 107
  4.1.2 Agricultural procedure, agricultural management and wine-
       making procedure chapters...................................................... 110
  4.1.3 Alimentary recipes ......................................................................... 111
  4.1.4 Conclusion ................................................................................... 112
4.2 Discussion of postverbal objects with verbs of adding......................... 115
4.3 Other light verbs.................................................................................... 117
  4.3.1 Do 'give'..................................................................................... 117
  4.3.2 Sumo 'take' ................................................................................ 122
  4.3.3 Facio 'make'................................................................................ 123
4.4 Conclusion ............................................................................................ 124
5. The VO and OVO orders in chapters 127, 156, 157 and 158 .................... 124
  5.1 Chapters 127, 156 and 158 .................................................................. 124
  5.2 Chapter 157 .......................................................................................... 127
6. Conclusion: (O)VO in chapters 54-162 ................................................... 128
7. The VO and OVO orders in chapters 1-53 ............................................... 129
8. Discussion .................................................................................................. 132
  8.1 The distribution of the (O)VO order in chapters 1-53 versus 54-162 ... 132
  8.2 The properties of postverbal objects and their predicates in De
       agricultura ....................................................................................... 134
  8.3 Explanation of the rules for verbs of adding and do 'give'................... 135
  8.4 Explanation of other light verbs: sumo/capio 'take' and facio 'make'. 139
  8.5 Explanation of the (O)VO order in general ......................................... 141
9. Pronominal objects.................................................................................... 143
10. Conclusion ............................................................................................... 144

CHAPTER 7: The position of S and V .............................................................. 147
  1. Introduction: the position of subjects.................................................... 148
  2. The position of subjects in chapters 1-53............................................. 149
  3. The position of subjects in chapters 54-162 ....................................... 151
  4. Conclusion ............................................................................................ 153
CHAPTER 8: The 'Fronting' of Nominals ......................................................... 155

Introduction ........................................................................................................... 156
1. First position in the clause ............................................................................ 156
2. F1 construction .......................................................................................... 161
   2.1 Distribution .......................................................................................... 161
      2.1.1 Shift to new discourse topic or subtopic of established discourse topic ........................................................................... 161
      2.1.2 List and list-like environments ......................................................... 163
      2.1.3 Contrast ......................................................................................... 165
      2.1.4 Non sentence-initial instances of F1 construction ......................................... 166
   2.2 Conclusion .......................................................................................... 168
3. F2 construction .......................................................................................... 168
   3.1 The construction .................................................................................. 168
   3.2 Distribution .......................................................................................... 170
      3.2.1 Shift to new discourse topic or subtopic of established discourse topic ........................................................................... 170
      3.2.2 List and list-like environments ......................................................... 172
      3.2.3 Shifts ............................................................................................ 173
      3.2.4 Switch between active referents ....................................................... 174
      3.2.5 The F2 construction with pronouns ................................................. 175
      3.2.6 Non sentence-initial instances of F2 construction ......................................... 175
   3.3 Conclusion .......................................................................................... 177
   Table 2: Distribution of F2 construction ....................................................... 177
4. F3 construction .......................................................................................... 178
   4.1 The construction .................................................................................. 178
   4.2 Distribution .......................................................................................... 179
      4.2.1 Topic shift, lists and list-like environments ........................................ 179
      4.2.2 Asides ............................................................................................ 180
      4.2.3 Switching from one active referent to another ..................................... 181
      4.2.4 The F3 construction with a pronoun ................................................. 184
   4.3 Conclusion .......................................................................................... 185
5. Themes ........................................................................................................ 185
   5.1 Extra-clausal constituents: an overview .................................................. 186
   5.2 Themes in Latin ..................................................................................... 187
   5.3 Themes in De agricultura ......................................................................... 190
      5.3.1 Syntax of main clause ...................................................................... 190
      5.3.2 Focus of main clause ....................................................................... 191
Abbreviations

2ps    second person singular
3pp    third person plural
3ps    third person singular
abl    ablative
acc    accusative
adv    adverb
dat    dative
FI     future imperative
fqp    future perfect
fut    future tense
gen   genitive
ger    gerundive
imp    imperfect
indecl indeclinable noun
inf    infinitive
int    interrogative particle
n/a    indeterminable as to nominative or accusative coding (applied only to fronted elements and their modifiers)
neg    negator
nom    nominative
pass   passive
PI     present imperative
perf   perfect tense
pres   present tense
sub    subordinator
subj   subjunctive

NB: Unless otherwise indicated, verbs are in the indicative and are present tense (i.e. tense and mood are only marked if the tense is not present or the mood is not indicative).