

Word Order Change in Western Nilotic

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ABSTRACT

Western Nilotic languages vary in the order of O and A relative to the verb. There are six theoretically possible patterns, VAO, VOA, AVO, AOV, OVA and OAV. Of these, there are only a few languages in the world with VAO order. Languages in which O precedes A are cross-linguistically rare. While some western Nilotic languages show AVO consistently in all types of clauses, other show VAO consistently in all types of clause. Some western Nilotic languages use some of the six patterns in different syntactic environments, while others use all six patterns in different syntactic environments, if O and A are interpreted in a broad sense. VAO is dominant in subordinate clauses even in those languages which deviate from consistent types.

Proto-Western Nilotic is reconstructed with VAO order. It also had a topic slot in sentence-initial position. Topicalization became an obligatory syntactic rule. As a result, VAO was changed into AVO/OVA. A was topicalized when tense was unmarked. O was topicalized when tense was marked. The change took place in independent clauses and spread into other types of clauses. Topic shift caused the development of complicated structures of word order in those languages which deviated from the consistent type.