

## Introduction

**T**he activity in which you are engaged at this moment is reading and understanding an English sentence which you have never seen before and may well never see again.

You may ask, how is it possible to understand a sentence which has never been seen? Or, to put it in a different way in terms of the logical problem relating to language acquisition: how is it possible for a child, given his inadequate information about and strictly limited experience of language, to acquire the highly complex and vibrant system reflected in his knowledge of language? Chomsky (1980: 180; 1986a: 51) refers to this logical problem as Plato's problem: in what manner is it at all possible for us to know so much with so little data at hand?<sup>1</sup> Only because the human being has at his disposal inborn and genetically determined powers.

Human language, its acquisition and the use made of it pre-suppose the existence of such an inborn and genetically determined mental basis for the human mind.<sup>2</sup>

According to this view, language is not a random collection of features acquired by the trial-and-error method, conditioning, and the strengthening of purely physiological reflexes and associations, used merely as responses to a stimulus.

- 1 Plato's answer was that knowledge is retained from a previous existence (Kasher 1991: 15).
- 2 Chomsky (1975: 4) looks upon language as a mirror of the human mind. According to Chomsky (1980: 47) the mind comprises various cognitive capacities with specific structures and principles.

A child's knowledge of language is developed by means of a mental competence, *ie* language acquisition, which enables a child to use any language as a first language on the basis of his/her contact with a finite number of language utterances.

Chomsky (1986a: 1-13) maintains that what is commonal or universal for all human languages is the inborn capacity of every human being to acquire language. The child's potential for language acquisition — species-bound and biologically founded mental capacity — is therefore realised in the universal, not the language-specific aspects of its language competence.

To put this in more concrete terms, in its initial stages, the language acquisition of a child represents a highly structured system of fundamental principles and open parameters<sup>3</sup> associated with the features of lexical heads. Language acquisition entails the determination of these parameters for each and every language. Knowledge of an (acquired) language means knowledge of the system of the finite number of principles and fixed parameters of that particular language (Botha 1989: 88).<sup>4</sup> By means of this system of principles and parameters the speaker of a language is enabled to produce, interpret and understand an infinite number of sentences in that language.

Chomsky (1975: 78-9)<sup>5</sup> defines language as a collection of sentences, universal as far as some features are concerned, but also limited by language-specific principles. The structure of every expression of language is fully determined by the interaction of principles among themselves and with the features of lexical heads.

If it is accepted that language is limited by certain linguistic principles, is it then possible to maintain that any language may adopt a free choice of word order, for instance as in (1)-(6)?

3 By the term *parameter* is understood the various possibilities/options from which specific languages may make choices.

4 This component of linguistic knowledge or language competence is also referred to as the computation system. A lexicon is also understood as being part of language competence.

5 Cf also de Haan *et al* (1974: 5-6) for a definition of language.

- (1) S-V-O<sup>6</sup> > Johan skop die bal [John kicks the ball]  
 (2) S-O-V > Johan die bal skop [John the ball kicks]  
 (3) V-O-S > skop die bal Johan [kicks the ball John]  
 (4) V-S-O > skop Johan die bal [kicks John the ball]  
 (5) O-S-V > die bal Johan skop [the ball John kicks]  
 (6) O-V-S > die bal skop Johan [the ball kicks John]

At least two considerations support a negative response to the suggestion that word order in any language can be free, namely:

- Word order in Afrikaans follows a set pattern (Oosthuizen 1996: 72-3).

Sentence (1) is [+ acceptable] in Afrikaans.

Sentence (2) is [+ acceptable] in Afrikaans only for sub-ordinate clauses -

dat Johan die bal skop [that John kicks the ball]

Sentence (4) is [+ acceptable] in Afrikaans only in a sentence posing a question -

Skop Johan die bal? [Does John kick the ball?]

Sentences (3, 5 and 6) are [- acceptable] in Afrikaans.

- Language acquisition by children would be impossible (Botha 1989: 24).<sup>7</sup>

As far as Biblical Aramaic (BA)<sup>8</sup> is concerned, however, sentences (1)-(6) are [+ acceptable] as principal clauses without any exception.

- 6 S - subject  
 S's - subjects  
 V - verb  
 V's - verbs  
 O - object  
 O's - objects.

7 According to Fromkin & Rodman (1988: 381) it would have been completely impossible for any child to acquire and to master any language if it could adopt any free word order in a sentence.

8 The language is called Aramaic, a word derived from Hebrew אֲרָמִי (arāmij) (Ezra 4:7 and Dan 2:4a). Aramaic is a composite term indicating a number of Semitic dialects related to Hebrew. BA is an Aramaic dialect in which Genesis

On this presupposition, then, is it possible to claim that BA word order is free?

The gist of the problem besetting the traditional BA word order paradigm will now be discussed and elaborated.<sup>9</sup> The theoretical framework, delimitation and composition of the study will then be outlined.

### 1.1 Problem statement and hypothesis

It is generally accepted by BA grammarians that word order in BA is free.<sup>10</sup> Rosenthal (1974: 56), for instance, maintains that the word order in a verbal sentence is free and not hampered by any rules. Koopmans (1957: 86) follows suit by mentioning that the word order in BA is free and that the typical Semitic word order of V-S-O is

31:47 (two words); Jeremiah 10:11; Daniel 2:4 - 7:28; Ezra 4:8 - 6:8 and Ezra 7:12-26 are written.

Important grammars dealing with BA are those of Kautzsch 1884, Marti 1896, Koopmans 1957, Rosenthal 1974, Bauer & Leander 1927 and Segert 1975.

9 For general remarks on word order in Biblical Hebrew, *vide* Muraoka (1985: 2-6).

10 The following grammarians presuppose a free word order for BA: Kautzsch 1884: 161, Baumgartner 1927: 128, Charles 1929: 43, 106-7, Kutscher 1958: 4, Wiseman *et al* 1965: 76, Segert 1975: 422, Hasel 1981: 224, Zdravko 1992: 100.

BA grammarians refer to the free word order in BA in order to explain various phenomena:

- To determine the time of origin of BA (Kutscher 1958: 2-33; Hasel 1981: 219-24).
- As language change (Charles 1929: 106-7).
- To indicate the same author for different parts (Charles 1929: 43).
- To indicate a variation in dialects (Kutscher 1958: 4).

A considerable number of BA grammarians (Rowley 1929: 104; Kutscher 1970: 362; Baumgartner 1927: 128; Wilson 1912: 303-5; Zdravko 1992: 99-100; Wiseman *et al* 1965: 76; Segert 1975: 400, 422) employ the free word order of BA as comparative material whereby they identify Aramaic dialects in certain Aramaic documents. Beyer (1984: 23-76) and Johns (1972: 1-4) discuss the various Aramaic dialects.

- To throw light on language and style in BA (Wesseliuss 1988: 208-9).

Rosen (1963) and Muraoka (1966) offer explanations for the problems besetting the BA verb system in terms of its being a temporal system.

no longer a generally accepted rule of BA and that other word orders are also prevalent. Bauer & Leander (1927: 339) add:

[...] kann der Akkusativ in allen Fallen dem Verbum folgen oder ihm vorangehen, ohne da in letzteren Falle eine besondere Hervorhebung beabsichtigt zu sein bracht.

Bauer & Leander (1927: 343) indicate that all of the six possibilities obtaining in word order are present in BA, viz:

V(erb)-S(ubject)-O(bject)

(Dan(iel) 2:44) יְקִים אֱלֹהִים שְׂמִיָּא מְלְכֻי (7)

*jeqijm - 'eelâb - šmajjâ' - malkû*<sup>11</sup>

he will set up - God - of heaven - kingdom

“The God of heaven will set up a kingdom”.

V-O-S

(Dan 7:18) וְיִקְבְּלוּן מְלְכֻתָּא קְדִישִׁי עֲלֵיוּנִין (8)

*wijqabbelûn - malkûtâ' - qaddijsej - 'eljownijn*

and they will receive - the kingdom - the saints - of the Most High

“And the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom”.

S-V-O

(Dan 3:1) נְבוּכַדְנֶצְצַר מְלָפָא עֲבַד צֶלֶם דִּי־דָהָב (9)

*nebûkadnêtsar - malkâ' - `abad - tselem - dij - debab*

King Nebuchadnezzar - made - an image - of - gold

“King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold”.

S-O-V

(Dan 2:7) מְלָפָא חֲלָמָא יֵאֲמַר (10)

*malkâ' - xêlmâ' - je'mar*

11 The transcription system used is as follows:

Consonants

´ b g d h w z x th j k l m n s ` p ts q r sh š t

Vowels

i (gierék), ê (seghol), e (tseirei), a (patag), â (kamets), ô (kamets gatoef), o (golem), u (kibboets), û (sjoerek).

e (voiced sjwa), a (gatef patag), o (gatef kamets), ee (gatef seghol).

For the nomenclature of the vowel system, cf Van der Merwe *et al* (1997: 13).

the king - the dream - let he tell

“Let the king tell the dream”.

(Dan 2:48) אֲדַיִן מֶלֶכָא לְדַנְיָאֵל רַבִּי (11)

*édajin - malká' - ledâniyje*<sup>12</sup> - *rabbij*

then - the king - Daniel - he elevated

“Then the king elevated Daniel”.

O-V-S

(Ezra 4:17) פִּתְגָמָא שְׁלַח מֶלֶכָא (12)

*pitgâmá' - šelax - malká'*

the reply - he sent - the king

“The king sent the reply”.

O-S-V

(Dan 2:27) רְזָה ... לֹא חַכְמַיִן ... לְהַסְתֵּינָה (13)

*râzâb - lâ' - xakkijmijn - jôklijn - lebasawâjâb*

the mystery - not - the wise man - they can - to explain

“No wise man can explain the mystery”.

The view that word order in BA is free is highly problematic in the light of the following considerations:

- (i) The nature of the principle-and-parameter approach to linguistics  
As stated in 1.1, that word order is free in BA is highly problematic, given the way in which a system of abstract principles and fixed parameters develops in the human mind during the process of language acquisition. In order to know a language like BA one has to know the system of principles and fixed parameters for BA. In the grammar of BA the specific values of the fixed parameters will licence the various acceptable word orders.<sup>13</sup> Consequently to assert that any language adopts a free word order is highly problematic, given the system of principles and parameters.

12 ל: may introduce a direct object in BA.

13 Every grammar seeks to characterise the language competence of its speakers (Botha 1977: 29).

## (ii) The distinction between marked and unmarked word order

The idea of a free word order is also highly problematic in the light of the distinction drawn between unmarked and marked word order.

An explanatory distinction between unmarked and marked word order in Biblical Hebrew (BH) can be found in Van der Merwe *et al* (1997: 301): BH is known as a V-S-O language. This means that the ordinary or unmarked word order in any BH sentence will start with the verb (V), followed by the subject (S) and the object (O). If the V is not in the initial position, it is called a sentence with an unusual or marked word order. By means of this marked word order the BH speaker is able to express some particular meaning. If it is claimed that BA has free word order, the conclusion arising from the distinction between marked and unmarked word order is that all of the six word orders in BA are unmarked. This argument, however, is assailable in that a BA speaker will experience difficulty in conveying certain meanings.

## (iii) Compulsory word orders

The noting down of all of the six possible word orders in BA by Bauer & Leander (1927) has become problematic in the light of Cook's (1986: 1-16) approach to possible compulsory word orders in the Aramaic of Daniel.

Bauer & Leander (1927) treat word order in BA as being completely free and consider any explanation of why each word order adopts its particular sequence completely unnecessary. Cook (1986), however, points out specific constructions where a fixed/stereotyped word order applies to a particular interpretation. Moreover Cook (1986) stresses the fact that a definite meaning can be expressed by a specific word order. This relates to the position of V in V-O and O-V constructions in particular. As far as Cook (1986) is concerned, nothing can be achieved by taking note of the fact that any language (for instance) has more V-O type sentences than O-V sentences, unless the reason for this phenomenon is also firmly established. In his quest for a solution to the problems besetting the BH verb system,<sup>14</sup>

14 McFall (1982) provides an exposition of those problems besetting the verbal system of biblical Hebrew.

De Caen (1995: 69) reached the conclusion that the key to the correct understanding of the verb system is verb movement (V movement).

Taking all this into account, the following questions relating to word order in BA arise:

- What syntactic indications exist for the preference of one order rather than another?
- Are there specific determinants present to explain differences in word order?
- What are these determinants and how are they syntactically presented to bring about a difference in word order?
- What is the ordinary or unmarked word order of BA?
- How should the marked word orders of BA be derived?
- Is there a difference between sentences with intransitive, transitive or ditransitive V's?
- Is there any difference in the word order with finite V's when it is used in combination with a perfect, imperfect or participle?
- How is the word order of sentences with no null-subjects (NNS) and null-subjects (NS) to be explained syntactically?

In an effort to find a solution to all these questions (and on the strength of the suggestion preferred by Cook (1986)), the specific role played by the V in word order was taxonomically investigated.<sup>15</sup> No particular word order can be associated with or linked to a particular genealogical formation, class of declension, modus or aspect.

Within the parameters of Chomskyan linguistics the theoretical development in connection with V movement led to the explanation of several word orders. A recent study by Borer (1995) showed that V movement is a deciding factor in the determination/explanation of word orders.<sup>16</sup> Borer (1995) advances a hypothesis whereby the transition from V-S-O word order to S-V-O word order in Modern Hebrew (MH) is explained.

15 Buth (1987) discusses the word order in BA from the perspective of functional grammar and discourse analysis.

16 Several word order studies in languages, including Chung (1990), Wilder (1994) and Mallen (1993), manage to show that V-shift is capable of explaining the various word orders in languages.



The hypothesis which will be justified in the present study is as follows:

- Word order in BA is not free.
- V movement as proposed in the Minimalist Programme (MP) (Chomsky 1992)<sup>17</sup> is adequate to explain the various word orders in BA.

## 1.2 Theoretical framework

Chomsky's (1992) MP will serve as the theoretical framework for this study. The MP completes the train of thought which commenced in the seventies, viz the movement from specific grammatical rules describing specific syntactical constructions to the concept of general principles as an explanation for interaction of syntactic phenomena. The idea is to follow the most economic way of satisfying the requirements of the principles. The bare minimum of principles and grammatical constructions is used to express the basic assumptions contained in the MP: do what is most economical.

Within the MP, language competence is regarded as comprising command of:

- a lexicon and
- a computation system for human language.

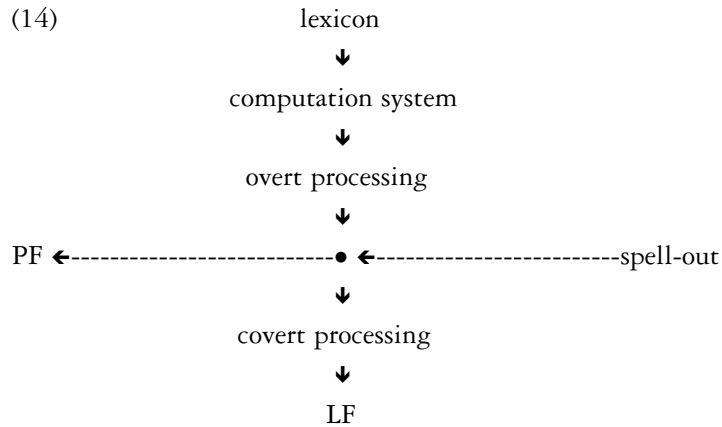
Items are selected from the lexicon by the computation system in order to generate syntactic derivations and structural descriptions.

Structural descriptions representing the linguistic expressions of a language consist optimally of two conjoined formal representations, namely a PF-representation and an LF-representation<sup>18</sup> respectively producing those aspects of sound (form) and of meaning which are determined by language competence.

17 A subsequent study by Chomsky has already been published, viz *Categories and Transformations* (Chomsky 1995: 219-394). Various modifications have been made to Chomsky (1992). For the purposes of this study the MP in its original guise will be used (Chomsky 1992). Chomsky (1992) provides an adequate means of approach to explain the data at his disposal.

18 PF-representation → articulatory-perceptual system.  
 LF-representation → conceptual-intentional system.

The MP set-up is as follows:



Syntax may be reduced to a simple description: the way in which constituents derived from the lexicon are projected, merged and moved in order to produce well-formed structures at the PF and LF levels.

The derivation of a sentence is subject to the general principles of economy which means that the derivation should involve as few moves as possible and the consequential representations should require as few signs as possible. The direct result of economy of derivation is that the move always follows the shortest route. Another consequence is that any move not caused by the dictates of morphological attribute-licensing is excluded without further ado.

Lexical heads, not associated with clusters of lexical features are divided into two general types:

- substantive and
- functional.

Substantive heads are typical sound-meaning units while functional heads are associated with inflection morphology.

The features of functional heads (which fall into two general types, viz N-features and V-features, both of which can be either strong or weak) are employed in the course of the derivation to license the corresponding features of the substantive heads. In this way

the substantive heads are licensed for interpretation at the PF and LF levels of representation. Successful licensing implies that the relevant features of a functional category are eliminated prior to the two levels of representation, *ie* overt and covert syntax, or prior or subsequent to the spell-out phase. Strong features are eliminated in overt syntax, while weak features are eliminated after spell-out in covert syntax (see sections 2.2.2 and 2.2.4).

Within the MP the perceptible word order differences among languages can be reduced to parametrical differences in the morphological features from which functional categories are assembled. Only one single subjacent word order for all human languages, namely S-V-O, is proposed within the MP.

### 1.3 Delimitation

This study will examine the language BA as reflected in Dan 2:4-7:28, Ezra 4:8-6:8 and Ezra 7:12-26. This study is limited to a syntactical explanation of the various word orders in BA and the position of adjuncts is omitted. Only verbal sentences are taken into account (nominal sentences are not covered by the ambit of this study). Only finite V's in the perfect, imperfect and participial declension are taken into account.

### 1.4 Organisation

The rest of this study is composed as follows:

Chapter 2 offers a brief survey of the development of V movement in Chomskyan linguistics up to the MP (Chomsky 1992). The notions of the MP used in the various analyses will also be explained in detail. An analysis of the part played by V movement in the derivation of BA word order is offered in Chapters 3 to 6. Chapter 3 consists primarily of a description and explanation of word orders caused by intransitive V's, namely S-V and V-S. In Chapter 4 a description and explanation of the word order without any S's *viz*, V-O and O-V, is contemplated. The implication of transitive V's for the derivation of word order will be discussed in Chapter 5. Six representative word orders, *viz* V-S-O, S-V-O, O-V-S, V-O-S, O-S-V and S-O-V, will be explained by means of V movement in BA. The word orders of

ditransitive V's of BA, which have not as yet been investigated, will be described and explained in Chapter 6. The final chapter, Chapter 7, contains a summary of the conclusions arrived at in the course of the study.