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# Word order in Slovene and English

## *Povzetek*

### **Besedni vrstni red v slovenščini in angleščini**

Razlike v besednem redu v slovenskem in angleškem jeziku so v članku obravnavane z vidika predstavitve informacije. Članek vsebuje tudi predloge, kdaj je pri prevajanju iz slovenščine v angleščino najbolj potrebno spremeniti besedni red.

## *Abstract*

### **Word order in Slovene and English**

Differences in word order between Slovene and English are discussed from the point of view of presentation of information. The author offers guidelines as to when a change of word order is likely when translating from Slovene to English.

## Introduction

There is much emphasis in discussions of the problems of translating from Slovene to English on vocabulary/terminology or smaller lexico-grammatical units. Similarly, the translation revision process usually focuses on surface features such as prepositions, articles and punctuation. However, one of the most com-

mon problems I come across in reviewing translations is to do not with which words are used, but the order in which they are used – most of the right words seem to be there, but the sentence still does not read or ‘sound’ like English. This is the issue I would like to look at more closely here.

## The flow of information

Word order is far freer in Slovene than in English: »the Slovene inflectional system means there is little scope for ambiguity and the sequential order of words does not change their syntactic or semantic functions« (Herrity 2000, 333). Slovene word order varies according to communicative, expressive or stylistic factors; in English it matters not only from a syntactic point of view, but with regard to ease of processing by the reader. In particular, the information principle and the principle of end-weight (Biber et al 1999, Ch. 11) lead read-

ers to expect information to be distributed in a particular way; failing to adhere to these principles for no apparent contextual reason undermines both the cohesion and coherence of the text, causing problems for the reader.

Information in a text can be divided into **given** and **new**. The former is treated by the speaker/writer as recoverable from the preceding discourse or context of situation; the latter is what the speaker/writer chooses to present as worthy of attention or ‘newsworthy’ (see Halliday 1967 and Fries 1994). The

preferred distribution of information in the clause in English is for a gradual rise in information load as the clause progresses – this is the ‘information principle’. The unmarked pattern is always given-new. This makes the job of the listener/reader easier and also contributes to **cohesion** as the given information is »closest to that which it connects back to and the new information is very often taken up in the subsequent discourse« (Biber et al, op.cit. 897). Consider the following (invented) sequence:

The report I’m talking about is the one we discussed at the last meeting. We were supposed to respond to it within a few days.

Both of these sentences begin with information which the speaker feels can be understood from what has been said before and build up to the information the speaker regards as most ‘newsworthy’. This does not mean that the climax of information has to be at the end of the clause – information can be re-ordered or fragmented to serve the needs of discourse. However, deviating from the principle does mean that the resulting clause is stylistically marked (we shall see some examples below).

## Word order

This term is partly a misnomer, as we are actually referring to the order of elements such as phrases and clauses rather than just words: i.e. subject, verb, objects, predicates and adverbials.<sup>1</sup> English word order may not exactly be fixed, there is variation, but »the placement of core elements in the clause is strictly regulated« (Biber et al, op.cit. 898; my underlining). Any variations that do occur are unusual or **marked** choices of word order.

With the exception of certain interrogative (e.g. involving ‘do’) and negative clauses (e.g. following ‘Never’), there is a preferred, un-

The information principle is supported by the general principle of **end focus**, which places the nuclear intonation or stress on the last lexical item in the clause – and thus on the new information:

The spokesperson announced that they were satisfied with the results of the new measures.

This is not undermined by ‘double focus’, in which an adverbial at the start of the sentence may also be emphasised:

At today’s press conference, the minister expressed his confidence that the conference would be a success.

Further support is provided by the principle of **end-weight**. In any clause, elements are frequently of different size, complexity or **weight**: by placing long and complex elements towards the end of the clause, we ease comprehension by the receiver, who does not have to retain complex information in short-term memory. Since ‘heavy’ elements tend to have a high information load, then the information principle and the principle of end-weight often reinforce each other.

marked order of clause elements: subject before verb, verb before its complements, and so on. Marked word order is where core clause elements are placed in an unusual position to achieve cohesion, emphasis or some other stylistic effect. The major clause patterns in English, determined largely by how many elements the verb combines with, are as follows<sup>2</sup>:

SV	Subject – verb phrase Answers the question ‘What does/did X do?’ Often has an optional adverb added.
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<sup>1</sup> We shall continue to use the term ‘word order’ in the rest of this article, rather than ‘order of clause elements’, for reasons of familiarity.

<sup>2</sup> This analysis is based on that used in the Longman Grammar of English (Biber et al 1999). Note that in other grammars (such as Quirk et al) ‘predicate’ may be referred to as ‘complement’.

- e.g. We **waited** (patiently).
- SVA Subject – verb phrase – obligatory adverbial  
Answers ‘When is/was X? Where is/was X?’ The adverbial may be left out.  
e.g. He **was lying** on the floor.
- SVP<sub>s</sub> Subject – verb phrase – subject predicate  
Characterising pattern answers ‘What is/was X (like)? How did/has X change/changed?’  
e.g. She **was a teacher** for ten years, now she’s a translator.  
e.g. The restaurant **was closed** by the health inspector.  
Identifying pattern answers ‘Which one is/was X?’  
e.g. My only reliable source of work **is a local publisher**.
- SVO<sub>d</sub> Subject – verb phrase – direct object  
e.g. The demonstrators **burned** the American flag.  
e.g. He **wrote** a book about climate change.
- SVO<sub>p</sub> Subject – verb phrase – prepositional object  
This pattern is rather difficult to distinguish from SVA! The prepositional object can be elicited with the question ‘Who? What?’  
e.g. A newly appointed commission **will look into** ways of economic and industrial co-operation.
- SVO<sub>i</sub>O<sub>d</sub> Subject – verb phrase – indirect object – direct object  
e.g. Ivan’s mum **brought** him a cup of coffee.
- SVO<sub>d</sub>O<sub>p</sub> Subject – verb phrase – direct object – prepositional object  
e.g. Some analysts **blame** the situation **on** tough competition in the European market.
- SVO<sub>d</sub>P<sub>o</sub> Subject – verb phrase – direct object – object predicate  
e.g. My mother **found** it cold here.  
e.g. I **didn’t find** it funny.
- SVO<sub>d</sub>A Subject – verb phrase – direct object – obligatory adverbial  
e.g. She **placed** the baby on a blanket in the living room.  
e.g. **Leave** the essay in my pigeon hole.

Of course, clauses are adapted to fit the requirements of communication. For example, in visual descriptions such as we find in tourist guides, the fronting of locational information reflects the way we use such guides and look at the world around us (the technical term for this is ‘iconicity’):

Below the castle, nestle the red-roofed houses of the old town.

Similarly, we may switch from the active to the passive voice to retain the same ‘theme’ in subject position, maintain cohesion and thus ease processing:

The Minister got out of the car. He was immediately surrounded by journalists.

These and other devices, such as the use of existential ‘There’ (e.g. There are are so many reasons why I can’t marry you.) and clefting (e.g. It’s the expense that worries me.) can be employed to make clauses fit the context, building a coherent text, giving emphasis where required and making the reader’s task easier. However, what concerns us here is specifically the construction of clauses as part of the process of translating from Slovene to English.

## Translating from Slovene

Before putting anything down in English, we should analyse the Slovene sentence or clause (in the case of a complex sentence) and identify

in particular the main verb and the subject, followed by any objects, predicates and adverbials – including those which give a temporal,

locational or other 'frame' to the sentence and may need to go in initial position. We should also bear in mind the given-new information pattern and the end-weight principle. Let us now look at some examples.

## Sentences beginning with a preposition

Our first group of examples involve an initial prepositional phrase in Slovene that either functions as the prepositional object of the verb or indicates the frame of the action.<sup>3</sup> In the first example, from an Adria Airways passenger information sheet, we find the pattern: prepositional object, direct object, time adverbial, verb, subject. In the suggested translation, the framing time adverbial goes at the front of the clause, followed by subject, verb and object; in this way, the most newsworthy information is placed at the end:

(1<sub>S</sub>) *Z najpomembnejšimi varnostnimi napotki vas bo pred poletom seznanilo naše kabinsko osebje*

(1<sub>E</sub>) Before take-off (A), the cabin crew (S) will acquaint (V) you (O<sub>d</sub>) with important safety procedures (O<sub>p</sub>)<sup>4</sup>

In the next example, which immediately follows the heading *Kajenje na letalu*, the use of the passive means that the object (which conveys given information in the context) is in subject position and the newsworthy information contained in the adverbial phrase again occurs at the end of the sentence:

(2<sub>S</sub>) *Na rednih in čarterskih poletih Adrie Airways kajenje ni dovoljeno.*

(2<sub>E</sub>) Smoking (O<sub>d</sub>) is not permitted (V<sub>pass</sub>) on any of Adria's scheduled or charter flights (A).

Example 3, from a formal letter, involves transposition (a prepositional phrase is translated by a noun phrase) as well as a shift to an

unmarked SVO pattern, with the heaviest item (the complex noun phrase with the head word 'memories') last:

(3<sub>S</sub>) *V lepem spominu mi je ostal tudi vaš uradni obisk v Sloveniji konec januarja.*

(3<sub>E</sub>) I (S) also have (V) very positive memories of your official visit to Slovenia at the end of January (O<sub>d</sub>).

The next two examples, involving different prepositions, come from a law on the recognition of the qualifications of EU citizens. The first involves the pattern prepositional object, verb, subject, direct object, which becomes a more regular SVO pattern in English, with a gradually rising information load:

(4<sub>S</sub>) *Zoper odločbo ministrstva ima kandidat pravico vložiti pritožbo na Vlado Republike Slovenije.*

(4<sub>E</sub>) An applicant (S) shall have (V) a right to lodge an appeal (O<sub>d</sub>) against the decision of the ministry (O<sub>p</sub>) with the Government of the Republic of Slovenia (O<sub>p</sub>).

The second involves a reflexive verb, signalling the need for the passive in English, which allows the sentence element of greatest 'weight' to occur at the end of the sentence:

(5<sub>S</sub>) *Za vloge in upravna dejanja, opravljena po tem zakonu, se plačuje taksa po zakonu, ki ureja upravne takse.*

(5<sub>E</sub>) A fee in line with the act governing administrative fees (O<sub>d</sub>) shall be paid (V<sub>pass</sub>) for applications and administrative tasks performed under the present act (O<sub>p</sub>).

The next example also involves the passive and a shift of information from the beginning to the end of the clause:

(6<sub>S</sub>) *Med vzletanjem in pristajanjem si morate pripeti varnostni pas*

<sup>3</sup> Note that the 'frame' is usually locational: where a temporal frame is involved this may well be expressed by a sentence initial adverb in English.

<sup>4</sup> Note that in all examples in this article, the translation suggested is not necessarily the published one.

- (6<sub>E</sub>) Passengers (O<sub>d</sub>) are requested (V<sub>pass</sub>) to fasten (V) their seatbelts (S) during take-off and landing (A)

Note that the change from the direct form of address to third person (passengers) is due the preference in English for indirectness in situations when orders are being given. For similar reasons, the suggested translation is preferable to the published one involving the active voice and modal 'must' (Passengers must fasten their seatbelts).

In the final example of this type, from a company web site, the most newsworthy information is in clause-final position in both the original and the translation; however, the information from the initial prepositional phrase is moved to later in the clause to become part of the complex noun phrase:

- (7<sub>S</sub>) Na Mercatorjevih prodajnih policah je okoli 77% izdelkov slovenskih proizvajalcev.
- (7<sub>E</sub>) Around 77% of the products on Mercator's shelves (S) are (V) of Slovene origin (P<sub>s</sub>).

So, the presence of a sentence- or clause-initial preposition in Slovene represents an important clue pointing to the need for a possible change of word order in translation. However, we can only be sure of this need by considering also the information and end-weight principles as well as the use of transformational devices such as the passive.

## Sentences beginning with the object

Where the Slovene sentence begins with the object of the verb, the English sentence is likely to begin in the same way only if the passive is called for. In the first example, from a magazine text about Suha Krajina, we find the pattern direct object, subject, verb, adverbial. In the translation, a change of word order is essential:

- (8<sub>S</sub>) Sedanjo značilno podobo je grad dobil sredi 16. stoletja.
- (8<sub>E</sub>) The castle (S) acquired (V) its current characteristic appearance (O<sub>d</sub>) in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century (A)

By contrast, in example 9 (from the Adria text) the passive can be used, as the agent of the action is understood (the passenger) and so the translation can begin in the same way as the original:

- (9<sub>S</sub>) Ročno prtljago namestite v za to namenjen predal nad sedežem.
- (9<sub>E</sub>) Your hand luggage (O<sub>d</sub>) should be placed (V<sub>pass</sub>) in the overhead lockers intended for this purpose (A).

However, there are some local adjustments to word order due to another difference between the two languages: namely, the ability in Slovene to pre-modify a noun with a prepositional phrase (*za to namenjen*), which has to become a predicative phrase in English (intended for this purpose)<sup>5</sup>. We may think of this latter phrase as a relative clause with ellipsis of the relative pronoun; in other similar cases a full relative clause may be used: e.g. *Pred 10 leti umrla umetnik je ustvaril* - 'The artist, who died 10 years ago, was the creator of'. Returning to example 9, we might also note that the pattern 'N + prepositional phrase' in Slovene (*predal nad sedežem*) becomes the N-phrase 'the overhead lockers' in English.

In example 10, a reversal of word order is required in order to achieve a SVO pattern in English; there is no reason to use the passive here and the new information should come at the end of the English sentence:

- (10<sub>S</sub>) Konkretne rezultate je dal program Računalniško opismenjevanje.
- (10<sub>E</sub>) The computer literacy programme (S) has brought (V) tangible results (O<sub>d</sub>).

Even when the object occurs in sentence initial position for reasons of emphasis, as in this example from a report on Aerodrom Ljubljana, the word order would usually be changed

<sup>5</sup> It could be argued here that this phrase is unnecessary in information terms.

in English to place the emphasised information later in the clause:

- (11<sub>S</sub>) Veliko zaupanje v našo družbo je pokazal trg vrednostnih papirjev  
 (11<sub>E</sub>) The securities markets (S) showed (V) their great faith (O<sub>d</sub>) in our company (A)

In example 12, from a formal letter, the newsworthy information stands at the end of the sentence in both original and translation, but the order of the remaining elements is changed to achieve an SVO pattern:

- (12<sub>S</sub>) Vaš nastop na okrogli mizi o prihodnosti Evropske unije sem spremljal z velikim zanimanjem.  
 (12<sub>E</sub>) I (S) listened to (V) your contribution (O<sub>d</sub>) during the round table discussion on the future of the European Union (A) with particular interest (A).

Further examples are not required here, as the point is clear: a Slovene sentence beginning with the object of the main verb will require a shift in word order in English to put the object after the verb (and the subject before it) unless there is a positive reason to use the passive in that particular context.

## Sentences beginning with a passive participle

Where a Slovene sentence begins with the past passive participle, the corresponding English sentence may place the passive form at the end of the sentence, as in the following paragraph from the 2000 NPAA report:

- (13<sub>S</sub>) Priljubljenih je bilo 12 novih izobraževalnih programov tehniških in srednjih strokovnih šol ter štirje novi višješolski programi ter 10 novih izobraževalnih programov v dualnem sistemu poklicnega izobraževanja. Sprejeti so bili konkretni ukrepi za zniževanje osipa na področju srednjega šolstva.

- (13<sub>E1</sub>) Twelve new educational programmes for secondary technical

schools, four new further education programmes, and ten new vocational training programmes within the apprenticeship (dual) scheme have been prepared. Specific measures to reduce dropout in secondary schools have been adopted.

However, this leads here to what is sometimes referred to as a 'dangling verb': the reader has to retain a lot of information in short-term memory before finding out what the verbal action is. It also has the effect of focusing on the passive verb, which may not convey the most newsworthy information in the sentence. It is preferable, especially in multi-clause sentences, to place the verb after the first noun phrase (object). In the first sentence below, this requires the addition of a coordinating conjunction (italicised):

- (13<sub>E2</sub>) Twelve new educational programmes for secondary technical schools have been prepared, *as well as* four new further education programmes and ten new vocational training programmes within the apprenticeship (dual) scheme. Specific measures have been adopted to reduce dropout in secondary schools.

In the next example (from a news report) involving initial emphasis, the order of the elements in the first short clause still needs to change:

- (14<sub>S</sub>) Prizadeti so vsi – trgovine, hoteli, turistične agencije.  
 (14<sub>E</sub>) All are affected – shops, hotels, and tourist agencies.

Note that the unmarked pattern 'Shops, hotels, and tourist agencies are all affected.' would fail to convey the required emphasis.

## Sentences beginning with a verb

In the following short paragraph from the 2000 NPAA Report, there are three clauses be-

ginning with a verb where a change of word order is required and a similar clause (the initial one) which begins with a time adverbial:

(15<sub>S</sub>) *Iz leta v leto se izjemno povečuje število mest na terciarni ravni, povečuje se število diplomantov. Nastajajo samostojne visoke šole, začela se je preobrazba podiplomskega študija.*

(15<sub>E</sub>) The number of student places at tertiary level is increasing substantially each year; the number of graduates is also increasing. New independent higher education institutions are being established and the renewal of postgraduate studies has been launched.

Where a reflexive verb (e.g. *povečati se, začeti se*) begins a clause in Slovene, the English translation may either require the subject to be made specific and placed before the verb (e.g. in the first sentence), or may call for the use of the passive (e.g. in the final clause). The same may occur with clause-initial intransitive verbs, such as *nastajati*, translated here by the passive.

## Sentences beginning with a reason clause

The presence of a reason clause at the start of a Slovene sentence, especially if the clause is relatively lengthy, may signal the need for a change in word order in English. This is both because of the information principle and the principle of end-weight – the reader should not be expected to carry too much information in short-term memory. In the following example (again from the NPAA report), the subordinate reason clause is longer than the main clause:

(16<sub>S</sub>) *Zaradi večjega števila decentraliziranih akcij v okviru komunitarnih programov in vključitve EVS (Evropsko prostovoljno delo) v program Youth bo potrebno okrepiti kadrovske zasledbo obeh nacionalnih agencij;*

(16<sub>E</sub>) New positions will be needed in both of the national agencies because of the increase in the number of decentralised actions within the second-generation programmes;

## Sentences beginning with an adverb

A Slovene sentence may begin with an adverb of manner in order to draw attention to the quality (of performance) that the adverb indicates, as in this statement from the website of the company Zaslon:

(17<sub>S</sub>) *Hitro, varno in cenovno učinkovito podpiramo katerikoli finančno storitev na katerikoli tržni poti.*

The pattern in Slovene could be represented as: adverbial, [subject] verb, object, prepositional phrase. To translate this into English, not only do we need to place the subject and verb at the start of the sentence, but to use adjectives rather than adverbs (although in the second suggested translation the adjectives help form an adverbial phrase):

(17<sub>E1</sub>) We (S) provide (V) quick, secure and cost-efficient support (O<sub>d</sub>) for any financial service (O<sub>p</sub>) in any distribution channel (A).

(17<sub>E2</sub>) We (S) support (V) in a quick, secure and cost-efficient manner (A) any financial service (O<sub>d</sub>) in any distribution channel (A).

## Sentences beginning with the subject predicate

Placing the subject predicate or complement in sentence initial position, and thus before the verb, for purposes of emphasis seems relatively common in Slovene. This frequently involves placing an adjective such as *pomemben* and *zanimiv*, perhaps modified by an intensifier such as *zelo*, at the start of the sentence. In the following example, taken from the 2000 NPAA report to Brussels, the predi-

cate is longer than the subject, which may lead us, because of the principle of end-weight, to change the word order:

(18<sub>S</sub>) *Pomemben pokazatelj učinka uvedbe davka na dodano vrednost je tudi število zavezancev za DDV.*

(18<sub>E</sub>) The number of those registered for VAT (S) is (V) another important indicator of the effect of the introduction of this tax (P<sub>S</sub>).

Note that we could begin here with 'Another important indicator', but then it would be the number of those registered for VAT that would become the focus of the sentence.

The approach often taken in sentences of this type in English is to use the empty subject 'It', which means that there is no fundamental change in word order:

(19<sub>S</sub>) *Zelo velikega pomena za naše podjetje je, da si naše stranke in poslovni partnerji o nas ustvarijo dobro mnenje.*

(19<sub>E</sub>) It is of vital importance that our customers and business contacts form a favourable opinion of our company.

We will conclude with an interesting and stylistically marked example, taken from the 2000 NPAA report. The original sequence of elements has to be reversed in the translation so that the subject predicate is located after the verb:

(20<sub>S</sub>) *Kvaliteten premik pri razvoju zgoraj naštetih procesov in politik pomeni vstop v vse tri programe EU na področju izobraževanja, poklicnega izobraževanja in usposabljanja ter mladine s 1. majem 1999.*

(20<sub>E</sub>) Slovenia's participation in the three EU programmes in the field of education, training and youth, which began on 1 May 1999, has brought about a qualitative improvement in the development of these policies and their implementation.

It is, of course, Slovenia's participation in the EU programmes that has brought about (we might also say 'led to', 'resulted in', perhaps even 'meant') a qualitative improvement, not the other way round, and it is the latter information that should come at the end of the sentence in English.

## Conclusion

The differences between word order in Slovene and English should be constantly borne in mind when translating between the two languages. Retaining Slovene word order in an English text will make the reader's task much more difficult (or may actually mislead) because it will lead to constant violations of both the information principle and the principle of end-weight. The need for a change in word or-

der may be signalled by a Slovene sentence or clause beginning with a preposition, the object of the main verb, a passive participle, a (reflexive) verb, an adverb, a reason clause or the subject predicate. And as a general rule, unless the passive is involved, one should always look long and hard at any sentence in an English translation in which the verb precedes the subject.

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