

Postverbal Constituents in Omaha-Ponca

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One of the best known facts about Siouan syntax is that Siouan languages are verb-final. This is certainly true of Omaha-Ponca, at least in the sense of “basic” word order: the most common, normal word order has the verb at or near the end of the sentence, followed only by auxiliary, modal, or evidential elements, negation, conjunctions, complementizers, or other clause-final particles. We can represent this “normal” sentence structure very roughly as in (1), where AUX represents all auxiliary-like elements and COMP all complementizer-like elements. Noun phrases or other constituents precede V, as indicated by the elipsis dots “....”. A more detailed sentence-structure diagram would have separate projections for negation, modality, and so on, but for purposes of this paper the simple version will do.

(1) [CP[IP[VP V] (AUX)] (COMP)]

The point of this diagram is that all of the clausal projections in Omaha appear to be head-final: V is at the right edge of VP, I-heads are at the right edge of IP, and C-heads are at the right edge of CP. In fact, this right-headed character extends to at least some other projections in Omaha-Ponca: for instance, articles (D-heads) are at the right edge of DP, and the language has postpositional rather than prepositional PPs.

However, although verb-final order seems to be, as in other Siouan languages, the “basic”, “normal” word order, it is not uncommon in Omaha-Ponca for some other constituent to follow the verb. This sentence structure option is sketched in (2), where the final, boldfaced “XP” represents a word or phrase occurring after the verb and any clausal head elements.

(2) [CP[IP[VP V] (AUX)] (COMP)] **XP**

Non-verb-final constructions do occur in other Siouan languages, but may be more common in Omaha-Ponca than in the rest of the family. Rankin (Quapaw:27) notes that OVS is a frequent alternative to SOV structure in all the Dhegiha languages, especially modern Omaha, based on anecdotal evidence. Koontz (Preliminary Sketch of the Omaha-Ponca Language: 226) notes that both OVS and VSO orders are found in Dorsey’s Omaha and Ponca texts; he also mentions (228) that adverbial constituents sometimes follow the verb.

This paper presents a preliminary examination of postverbal constituents in some Omaha texts. My goal is to cast at least some initial light on several questions: the actual frequency of postverbal constituents, their grammatical status, and their function.

I. POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS -- A FIRST PASS

Postverbal constructions could, in theory, have several explanations. Among these are at least the following:

1. Mis-segmentation

First, and unfortunately not entirely discountable, is the possibility that such constructions are a result of my not knowing how to segment Omaha discourse into sentences; i.e. the apparent postverbal constituent might actually be part of the following sentence. There are reasons for thinking this is not a major factor, however: one is that the postverbal constituent sometimes clearly belongs semantically to the preceding and not the following sentence; another is that Dorsey's texts also have frequent postverbal constituents, so if I am missegmenting, so is he. But still, I am not always sure I am parsing correctly, so mis-segmentation may be a factor in some cases.

2. Afterthought

Second, it's possible that postverbal constituents are simply afterthoughts, and not properly part of the sentence at all. This kind of thing is common enough in spoken English and other languages too. We all say things like "That student called again today -- Judy Smith" or "...-the one from Utah", but no one claims English has a special right-peripheral noun phrase position.

In languages like English, where right dislocations are clearly afterthoughts, they are coreferential to a "real" argument elsewhere in the sentence. We don't say "*Called again today -- Judy Smith". It is hard to judge whether this is true in Omaha-Ponca, where arguments can always be zero. One indication of truly grammatical status (rather than just afterthought) would be if postverbal constituents are significantly more common in OP than in other Siouan languages, or more common than afterthought phrases in other languages.

3. Grammatical(ized) position (topic/focus/fore-/backgrounded XP?)

A third possibility is that Omaha-Ponca may have a grammaticalized sentence-final position, perhaps related to information structure. Thus, this might be something like a topic or focus slot, or a position for foregrounded or backgrounded material, of the type common in many languages; Hungarian, for instance, has both syntactic topic and focus positions.

4. Discourse-related

A fourth possibility is that postverbal constituents might have some discourse role. This actually overlaps with option (3) (since notions like "topic" relate to discourse as well as syntax), but might be less fully grammaticalized; functions like keeping track of a discourse topic might be handled by a strategy which is not strictly speaking a part of sentence grammar at all.

5. Semispeaker syndrome

A fifth possibility which should not be overlooked is that the speakers I have recorded, who make frequent use of postverbal constituents, are not fully fluent or that their Omaha

speech is influenced by their daily use of English. This obviously will be less likely if postverbal constituents are commonly found in earlier texts collected from monolingual speakers, as in fact turns out to be the case. I will show that non-V-final sentences are in fact just about as common in J. Owen Dorsey's texts as they are today.

6. ??

There may be -- indeed, probably are -- explanations which I have not thought of, too.

Let's look, then, at the data. The first issue I discuss is frequency.

II. FREQUENCY OF NON-VERB-FINAL CONSTITUENTS

To get some idea how common Non-Verb-Final constructions are in modern Omaha, I examined the reasonably well transcribed portions of my recordings. These contain three types of data: grammatical elicitation, narratives, and conversations. In elicited sentences, the proportion of non-V-final constructions is so low that I did not bother to count the huge number of V-final sentences in order to compute a percentage. (This of course reinforces the concept of V-final order as "basic": When an Omaha speaker is asked out of the blue, with no context, "How do you say 'John saw Mary at the store'" John and Mary and the locative phrase all get placed before the verb.)

However, there are a few elicited examples with some constituent following the verb; a bare handful in all of my data. Interestingly, in half of these the postverbal constituent is identical: an adverbial phrase or clause with *the di* 'when' (4 of the less-than-10 examples I noticed are similar to (3)). There is also at least one elicited example with a postverbal noun, (4) and several with extraposed relative clauses (as in (5)) or object clauses (6). In all of (3) through (6) the postverbal element in Omaha follows the verb in the English prompt as well, which may have had some influence. (The numbers in parentheses following each example are tape# and transcript page #.)

Non-V-Final elicited sentences (less than 10 total)

- (3) Clifford edádaⁿ gághe a [thashtóⁿbe t^he di]?
 what 3did3 Q 2see3 when

'What was Clifford doing when you saw him?' (5/17)

- (4) Águdi t^he áthe a [moⁿzéniⁿ]?
 where the? 1put3 Q milk

'Where should I put the milk?' (16B/9)

- (5) Mízhíⁿga thiⁿk^he tóⁿbe [shíⁿgazhiⁿga etá itháthe thiⁿk^he].
 girl the 1see3 doll her 1find3 the

'I saw the girl whose doll I found' (17/6)

- (6) Óⁿwoⁿshigthe amá wéamoⁿxa=b=azhi=noⁿ [iⁿdádoⁿ oⁿgóⁿtha=i=t^he].
 server the 3ask4=prox=neg=usually what 4want3=prox=evid

'The servers never ask us what we want.' (17/1)

The frequency of non-V-final sentences is considerably higher in connected text (both narrative and conversation); see table (7). The numbers here should be taken with a bit of salt. I counted only sentences, not subordinate clauses, which probably inflates the percentage of non-V-final constructions, since subordinate clauses seem to be overwhelmingly V-final. On the other hand, I counted as V-final sentences ending not only with clear complementizers, modal particles, and so on, but also with phrases meaning “and then”, “finally”, “thus”, or other such expressions which might be considered postverbal adverbs (or which actually might belong to the following sentence). Also, note that the count was done by hand, by scanning ends of sentences; I may have missed some things, particularly extraposed clauses, possibly overstating the number of V-final sentences. However, as a rough estimate we can assume the possible over-counts in both directions cancel each other out and the percentages are more or less accurate.

(7) Frequency in my 1990's text data:

| | V-Final | Non-V-Final | % of total Non-V-Final |
|--------------|---------|-------------|------------------------|
| narrative | 421 | 39 | 8% |
| conversation | 160 | 25 | 14% |
| total | 581 | 64 | 11% |

I have split the data into two types, “narrative,” consisting of stories and monologues told by a single individual, and “conversation,” consisting of stretches of taped speech in which two or three speakers engaged in unscripted dialogue. The difference in numbers between narrative and conversation in (7) probably is not significant. In fact, the percentage of postverbal constituents in different narratives varied widely -- from a high of 29% to a low of 0% -- presumably reflecting individual styles as well as circumstances of the telling. (The 29% was in the reluctant life story of a speaker who really didn't want to talk about herself.) Conversations showed a narrower range of postverbal constituent frequency, neither as high nor as low as the extremes found in narratives, perhaps because (by definition) more than one speaker was involved, tending to smooth out inter-speaker variation.

As a reality check (and to eliminate semispeaker syndrome as a major explanatory factor), I did a quick count of a couple of texts from Dorsey 1890. “The Youth and the Underground People” had 8% non-V-final sentences, and “Sithemakaⁿ's Adventure as a Deer” had 20%, for an overall average of 12%.

(8) Frequency in two random Dorsey 1890 texts:

| V-Final | Non-V-Final | % of total Non-V-Final |
|---------|-------------|------------------------|
| 224 | 27 | 12% |

This is not unlike the modern rate, in both range and average; it is actually higher than the average for narrative texts in my 20th century data. Though it is certainly not possible to

draw any strong conclusions from just these two rather short texts, it does at least seem clear that postverbal constituents have been around for a while in Omaha and are not simply or primarily an English-bilingual phenomenon. On the other hand, the similar numbers in tables (7) and (8) show that the frequent appearance of postverbal constituents in Dorsey's texts is not an artifact of the slow, pause-filled speech required for writing texts from dictation in the pre-taperecorder era, but is a feature of normal speech in the language.

III. POSTVERBAL CONSTITUENT TYPES/GRAMMATICAL CATEGORIES

The topic to which I turn next is the grammatical status of the postverbal constituents. The 64 non-V-final sentences in my text data break down as follows:

- (9): 38 DP (nominal phrase; including 4 place names)
 14 AdvP (time expression)
 12 other or unclear

The four place names included in the nominal number might be better treated as place adverbials, but even if this were done nominals would still be the majority of all postverbal constituents. The "other" class includes some clausal constituents, but mostly postverbal material which I don't understand well enough to parse. One example of each type is given in (10) through (13). Example (11) is a particularly adverbial-looking use of a place name, with *shéhit^he* preceding the actual name (the other three examples of this type are just a bare place name). (13) is a messy example just to give a realistic idea of how some of the data look; it has some English mixed in, a word or two I'm not sure of, and in particular the last word is unclear to me -- it could be a slightly garbled repetition of the word for 'shell', or perhaps it's an unfamiliar verb.

(10) DP (clearly nominal)

M. S. izházhe athíⁿ [nú ak^há].
 name 3have3 man the
 'The man was named M. S.' (BW6)

(11) DP? (place adverbial)

Hóⁿ thé t^he wa'ú wíⁿ ghagé noⁿ'óⁿ=noⁿ [shéhit^he Blackbird Hill].
 night this the woman one 3cry 3hear3=usually yonder
 'On this night they usually hear a woman crying over on Blackbird Hill' (BH2)

(12) Time adverbial

Móⁿzeska wathíⁿge=ta=i=t^he [itháwagthe].
 money lack3p=fut=prox=evid always
 'There won't be any money the whole time.' (CO8)

(13) "Other"

Ké de nóⁿxai óⁿska shell it was utháshta [edí nóⁿthai].
 turtle ? shell so? 3left3 there ?

‘They left (only) the turtle’s shell there.’ (CT39)

The nominal DPs which appear postverbally are nearly all the subject of their clause, though there are a few examples of objects. I have no really clear examples of more than one post-verbal constituent. However, Koontz does state that VSO order can be found in Dorsey.

Syntactically, it is fairly clear how to treat postverbal constituents in a basically V-final language: they must be “Right Dislocated” or, in more up-to-date terminology, right-adjoined to CP or moved into a Specifier of CP. (Or, in theories which insist on only leftward movement, they could be LEFT adjoined to CP, and then the remnant CP moved further left over them.) Whatever the specific movement, the result is that the postverbal XP is placed in the clausal periphery, in a similar manner to left-dislocated topics in a language like Hungarian. However, it is not clear whether this is a fully grammatical position (or process) in Omaha or whether it is a semi-grammatical performance effect.

Speakers do sometimes correct non-V-final sentences or express preference for a V-final version. For instance, in going over the text of *Jimmy and Blackie*, one of the Omaha language booklets produced by the Macy school, several speakers agreed that sentence (14a), which appears in the booklet, would be better said as the verb-final (14b).

(14)a. Góⁿki wahí t^he xé=noⁿ [tiút^hanoⁿ di].
 then bone the 3bury3=usually yard in
 ‘Then he buries the bones in the yard.’

b. Góⁿki wahí t^he tiút^hanoⁿ di xé=noⁿ.
 then bone the yard in 3bury3=usually (2/9)

This might indicate that non-V-final sentences are less than fully grammatical, or that something like an afterthought interpretation is correct. However, it seems at least as likely that speakers judging sentences in isolation simply do not have the discourse rationale for using a postverbal constituent and therefore prefer the less marked, V-final version.

IV. DISCOURSE FUNCTION OF POSTVERBAL CONSTITUENTS

This brings us to the question of just what discourse function the postverbal constituents might fulfil.

Many of the sentence-final constituents both in my texts and in the Dorsey texts I glanced through are words or phrases which refer back to an established discourse topic. Several of the examples given earlier are of this type: in (10) “the man” was introduced in the previous sentence; in (11) “Blackbird Hill” is the topic of the whole conversation, and in (12) the previous few sentences have been about the summer months and the prospect of not working during the summer; *itháwagthe* refers to the whole summer. A couple more examples of this type are given in (15), where “this person” is the main character of a

long narrative (of which this is the 18th sentence) and (16), where the preceding four sentences have all been about how generous and kind a certain girl's relatives have been.

Discourse Topic (also (10), (11), (12))

- (15) Wanóⁿxa=i=t^he [thé ak^há níkashiⁿga ak^há].
ghost=prox=evid this the person the
'This person was a ghost.' (GD18)

- (16) Shé graduation cake égi shteóⁿ gíthiwiⁿ [shé amá éthi t^ha amá].
that finally soever 3buy3 those the relatives ? the
'Those relatives of hers also bought some graduation cakes.' (GG16)

On the other hand, some postverbal constituents seem emphatic, and may even focus "new" information: though 'you' and 'relatives' are not exactly unexpected in the context of the examples (17) and (18), this is their first mention in the given text, and they are important information. The use of an independent pronoun "you" in (18) is marked for something like emphasis regardless of its position in the sentence.

Emphasis

- (17) Awák^heta né=ta=niⁿk^he shé a [thí]?
where 2go=fut=2aux ? Q you
Where will YOU go? (FD1)

- (18) Égoⁿ wábtahoⁿ=xti=moⁿ [éthi wiwíta ama wóⁿgithe].
thus 1thank3=very=1aux relatives my the all
'I thank all of my relatives very much.' (GG12)

At least some of the postverbal adverbs and adverbial phrases may fall under the emphatic classification too.

Some postverbal constituents repeat a constituent from earlier in the sentence, again possibly for emphasis. A couple of examples of this type are given in (19), with a simple repetition, and (20), with additional specification or clarification of the repeated element.

Repetition

- (19) Édi wa'ú zhiⁿgá thiⁿk^hé di ahí=bi [wa'ú zhiⁿgá thiⁿk^hé].
there old-woman the at 3arrive=prox old-woman the
'They came to the old woman's place. (MT19)

- (20) Toⁿiⁿgthiⁿhe izházhe abthiⁿ [umóⁿhoⁿ izházhe t^he].
name 1have3 Omaha name the/C
'My (Omaha) name is Toⁿiⁿgthiⁿhe.' (BW1)

I don't know how significant it is, but in several of my examples, the postverbal constituent is an English word or phrase. (There are about 4-7 instances of this in my data, depending on whether English place names are counted as code switches or not.) A few examples are given in (21) through (22). All of the speakers I recorded code-switch

V. CONCLUSIONS

The one thing that is crystal clear about the phenomenon of non-V-final constructions in Omaha is that it does exist; anything that shows up in 10% or so of sentences is a real part of the language, not a fluke. It is not the “normal” or “basic” order: 90% of sentences, including nearly all elicited grammatical examples and nearly all subordinate clauses, are V-final. However, it is a viable minority pattern, which must have some function in the language.

Just how to describe the phenomenon remains quite unclear, though. Both the grammatical status and discourse function of non-V-final constructions need further study. Postverbal constituents probably have some discourse-related function; perhaps something to do with topicality. But exactly what this function is, how grammaticalized it is, and the syntactic status of the “Right Dislocation” or CP-adjoined position all remain to be elucidated.

Works cited:

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for Hungarian: various works by Katalin Kiss, from the 1980s on, among others.