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Word Order Variation in Spoken Saudi Arabic: A Pragmatic Approach

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Abstract

One aspect in which languages vary is their differing patterns of word ordering in sentences. Some languages follow a restrictive word order, whereas others allow a flexible word order that does not affect the semantics of the text. In the literature, the Arabic language is deemed one of the flexible or "free word order" languages, which allow both VSO and SVO word orders without changing a clause's meaning. The present study aims to identify the pragmatic (morpholexical and discourse) factors that play a significant role in determining the variable subject-verb word order in spoken Saudi Arabic. A corpus-based approach was taken by collecting a sufficient amount of natural spoken Saudi utterances for analysis. The corpus contains data collected from six recorded Saudi Arabic TV interviews with Saudi personalities in which the guests related personal stories about their social and practical lives. A classification system proposed by Owens et al. (2009) was adopted as a study tool to distinguish between the diverse factors that may predict the variant word order in spoken Saudi Arabic and to determine whether any relationship exists between such factors. The study found that the distributions of SV and VS word orders in spoken Saudi Arabic are similar, with a slightly higher percentage in SV word order (58% SV vs. 42% VS), and that the morpholexical class of subjects significantly predicts word order. The findings also indicate that discourse-pragmatic functions play an important role in predicting word order.

1. INTRODUCTION

Languages vary according to their different patterns of word ordering in a sentence, with research showing that some languages follow a restrictive word order, whereas others offer flexibility in word order without affecting the semantics of the text. In the literature, the Arabic language is deemed one of the flexible or "free word order" languages, which allow both VSO and SVO word orders without changing the meaning of the clause (AlQahtani & Sabourin, 2015; Btoosh, 2017; Fakih & Al-Sharif, 2017; Thompson & Werfelli, 2012).

Prominent scholars have examined the issue of variable SV/VS order in a number of languages from pragmatic and discourse-based perspectives. Discourse-based studies typically recognize two pragmatic variables: information status and morpholexical class (Owens, Dodsworth, & Rockwood, 2009). Information-status studies mainly consider the given/new distinction and its link to variable SV orders (Ferrari, 1990; Givón, 1983; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Prince, 1981). Other studies have demonstrated that languages with pragmatically based word order have variable word order subsets that are based on morpholexical class (relating morphology to the representation of lexical form, i.e., viewing the basic units of lexical knowledge as morphemes: stems, roots, and affixes) (Laudanna & Cermele, 1997). Adopting this morpholexical view is believed to be necessary due to the significant role in some

languages (including Arabic) of bound morphemes, which represent not only grammatical functions (such as gender, number, and tense) but also lexical forms (subjects and objects). Relevant studies show evidence of a strong link between morpholexical class membership and word order (Kiss, 1998; Meyer, 1992; Naro & Votre, 1999; Payne, 1992; Rude, 1992). Owens et al. (2009) also assert that lexical class, along with the global functions of discourse, correlates significantly with SV or VS word order in spoken Arabic. In light of this, the present study aims to identify the pragmatic (morpholexical and discourse) factors that play a significant role in determining the variable subject-verb word order in spoken Saudi Arabic.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

For decades, the grammatical structure and word order of the various constituents of a sentence in any language have attracted strong interest in the linguistic fields. Renowned scholars, such as Noam Chomsky, have studied such structures and proposed universal rules to explain sentence structures cross-linguistically. However, the literature shows that word order structures vary from language to language due to various factors. In light of such concerns, numerous researchers have conducted studies to analyze word order in diverse languages, including the present language of interest: Arabic. This section reviews some of these studies and the different points of view they propose to describe the various factors that may affect the variant SV/VS word orders in Arabic. Studies discussing the unique qualities of Arabic word order are presented first, followed by those that attempt to explain variant Arabic word order from a syntactic perspective and, finally, those that describe such variations from the pragmatic perspective, which is adopted in the present study.

2.1.Arabic Word Order

A number of studies have described the flexibility of Arabic word order in comparison to other languages (Alduais, 2012; Bassam, Asma, Nadim, & Abeer, 2014; Hammadi, 2012). In a contrastive study, Alduais (2012) conducted research to compare and contrast the simple sentence structure (in the form of a statement) of Standard Arabic (SA) and Standard English (SE). SA proved to be a free word order system, whereas SE proved to be a fixed word order system. The study further concludes that SA can allow both word orders: (V+S+O) and (S+V+O), although the former structure is more common. The author also asserts that SE, in contrast, allows only one word order (S+V+O).

Hammadi (2012) agrees that Arabic has a flexible syntax, with sentences having different types of word order, such as VSO and SVO; he also identifies a third word order in Arabic—VOS—and explains that Arabic sentences have special cases that distinguish Arabic from other languages. According to Hammadi, an Arabic sentence can be constructed without verbs, for example, الشمس مشرقة (The sun is shining), which includes (subject + predicate) but no verb. In addition, a full sentence can be constructed without any syntactic errors with only one word, for example, اعطيتمونيها (You gave it to me), which includes (verb + subject + object) (Hammadi, 2012, p. 892). Hammadi further notes that the subject in the Arabic language takes several forms, as it may occur as the singular or plural of a proper noun or as a pronoun. Pronouns in Arabic, he stresses, may be either separate, connected, or hidden (Hammadi, 2012, p. 894), thus highlighting the diverse unique manifestations of the Arabic subject.

Bassam et al. (2014) similarly assert that Arabic has a relatively free word order. According to their study, it is very common to find VSO, SVO, and VOS word orders in an Arabic text. The authors also explain some of the characteristics and/or challenges of the Arabic language, one being that Arabic is a pro-drop language, that is, the subject can be omitted, setting scholars the challenge of deciding whether or not there is an omitted pronoun in the subject position, for example, (كتب الدرس).

2.2.Word Order Variation from a Syntactic Perspective

Since word order variation relies initially on the variation in syntactic structure of a language's sentences, the present author deemed it important to review a number of studies that examine variations in Arabic word order from a syntactic point of view. This review found that one of the more widely discussed issues in Arabic syntax is the position of subject-initial or verb-initial clauses. AlQahtani and Sabourin (2015), for instance, investigated the preference and processing of Arabic word order by heritage speakers of Arabic living in Ottawa, Canada. The findings support the idea that VSO order may be syntactically easier to derive than SVO order due to its fewer syntactic movements. Consequently, according to the study, the widespread prevalence of VSO order may be attributed to its easier processing when compared to SVO.

Similarly, Fakih and Al-Sharif (2017) show how SVO and VSO word orders are derived morpho-syntactically in Najran Arabic (NA) syntax and explain why and how the derivation of SVO word order comes after that of VSO order. The authors assume that the derivation of the unmarked SVO in NA takes place after applying a further step to the marked VSO. The study proposes that the default unmarked word order in NA is SVO, not VSO. In addition, the study explores subject-verb agreement asymmetry and shows that the asymmetry in NA is not related to word order differences but rather to gender agreement differences.

Thompson and Werfelli (2012) likewise assert that the contemporary spoken Arabic dialect in Saudi Arabia (as in all the Arabic-speaking world) allows both VSO and SVO word orders without changing the meaning of the clause. In their syntactic study, the authors investigated the position of the subject in spoken Arabic. They examined the processing times associated with these constructions and found that processing considerations provide evidence for which word order is used. They predicted that SVO order is more complex than VSO order as a result of two movements for the SVO order.

2.3.Word Order Variation from a Pragmatic Perspective

Studies adopting a pragmatic perspective on word order variation fall mainly into two fields: information-status studies and grammatical (morpholexical class) studies. Information-status studies examine languages' variable SV word orders mainly by considering the given/new distinction and its link to that variability. Scholars adopting this view (Ferrari, 1990; Givón, 1983; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Prince, 1981) propose that subjects conveying new referents occur post-verbally more often than previously mentioned or implied subjects. Such studies indicate that the link between topic continuity and word order is realized differently in various languages and must therefore be described anew for each.

Other pragmatic studies have attempted to shed light on word order variation by focusing on the grammatical properties of subjects and verbs, specifically, morpholexical class (Kiss, 1998; Meyer, 1992; Payne, 1992; Rude, 1992). Such studies show that languages with pragmatically based word order (such as Hungarian, Nez Perce, and Klamath) have variable word order subsets and argue that morpholexical class often predicts such word orders. In a study of Brazilian Portuguese, Naro and Votre (1999) also identify the existence of a "nonrandom" intersection between information status and morpholexical class in determining word order.

In another attempt to contribute from the pragmatic perspective to the understanding of languages with variable subject-verb word order, Owens et al. (2009) explored the relationship between the global functions of variable subject-verb word order and the morpholexical class of subjects in the spoken Arabic of the Arabian Peninsula (with samples taken from Kuwait, the Emirates, and Jeddah). The authors found a significant correlation between the lexical class (pronoun, pronominal, noun, and definiteness) and the discourse-defined lexical specificity of

a noun with SV or VS word order. They also show that VS order presents events, whereas SV order signals available referentiality.

2.4.Research Questions

To achieve this study's aims, the following research questions were investigated:

1. What are the distributions of SV and VS word orders in spoken Saudi Arabic?
2. Does the morpholexical class of subjects play a significant role in predicting word order in spoken Saudi Arabic?
3. Do discourse-pragmatic functions play a role in predicting word order in spoken Saudi Arabic?

3. METHODOLOGY

The researcher used a corpus-based method to collect a sufficient amount of natural spoken Saudi utterances for analysis so as to achieve the study's objectives. The corpus contains data from six recorded Saudi Arabic TV talk show interviews with Saudi personalities who were given the opportunity to spontaneously share various personal stories about their social and practical lives. Descriptive statistics were utilized to measure the distribution and frequency of the two word orders (SV and VS) in spoken Saudi Arabic. The two factors pertaining to the different spoken Arabic word orders as proposed by the study—morpholexical class and discourse-pragmatic functions—were further classified, analyzed, and discussed. This study adopted the methodology proposed by Owens et al. (2009), which is briefly explained below.

Owens and his coauthors (2009) used corpus-based methods to study subject-verb order in spoken Peninsular Arabic as well as the factors affecting Arabic speakers when choosing between SV and VS word order. The authors argue that the subject's morpholexical class and discourse function are broad predictors of SV/VS word order in spoken Peninsular Arabic, which, they contend, echoes a pattern that has been documented in a number of languages. Their study covered two geographic areas, embracing the Gulf Arabic dialects (spoken in Kuwait and the Emirates), representing eastern Peninsular Arabic, and the Jeddah dialect, representing western Peninsular Arabic. The tool employed in their study is discussed in the following section.

3.1.Research Tool

A classification system proposed by Owens et al. (2009) was adopted to analyze the collected data, to distinguish between the various factors that might predict the variant word order in spoken Saudi Arabic, and to determine whether any relationship exists between those factors. The results are discussed and compared to previous studies.

Figure 1

The Pragmatic Discourse Function (Discourse Status) and Morpholexical Realization Affecting SV/VS Word Order in Spoken Peninsular Arabic as Suggested by Owens et al. (2009, p. 24)

Discourse Status	**Morpholexical Realization**
	Peninsular Arabic
SV: available Referentiality	Pronouns, pronominals, contrastive nouns, general and generic nouns
VS: backgrounded topics	-
VS: presentation of new referents	Indefinite nouns
VS: presentation of events	Lexically/discourse-specific nouns (definite or indefinite)

Figure 1. Discourse status and morpholexical realization (Owens et al., 2009, p. 24)

Procedures

The research began with a review of the extant literature on variant word orders in several languages, including Arabic. Next, the corpus sample was collected and divided into further sections pertaining to subject classifications as proposed by the research tool, including morpholexical class (further divided into nouns [definite vs. indefinite], pronouns [attached vs. detached], and pronominals) and discourse function (further divided into new vs. given and general vs. specific) (see the appendices). Subsequently, data analysis and statistical measures were applied to arrive at, interpret, and explain the findings.

3.2.Data Analysis

The researcher initially collected around 2,000 words from the participants' speech (in 350 complete sentences, i.e., only sentences including both subjects and verbs). The total duration of the collected interviews was approximately two hours (around 20 minutes each). The collected data were then filtered to exclude sentences with covert (hidden) subjects (which is common in Arabic as a pro-drop language). This was a necessary step due to the difficulty of determining the position of the subject in such sentences, that is, whether it occurred before or after the verb. The final corpus for analysis comprised 1,429 words (in 291 sentences), which the researcher analyzed to measure the frequency and distribution of both word orders (SV and VS) and to determine whether the morpholexical class of subjects and pragmatic discourse functions contributed to the speaker's chosen word order. The following table illustrates the general distribution of word order in the analyzed data.

Table 1

Word Order in Saudi Arabic Discourse

SV	**VS**
170	121
58%	42%
291	

Table 1 shows that the participants used both SV and VS word order in their speech. The analysis yielded 170 tokens for SV order occurrences (58%) and 121 tokens for VS order occurrences (42%). This illustrates that sentences with SV order occurred more frequently in

the participant's speech than those with VS order, a result consistent with the work of Owens et al. (2009, p. 8), who found that total SV cases accounted for 59%, whereas VS cases accounted for 41%. The following two examples show the difference between the SV and VS orders.

Example 1 (SV): KA narrates her story with her mother as she was preparing her daughter to take her place and lead the Shi'a funerals:

(1) *ʔummy tuḥaḍḍirny lixilāfatihā*
my mother preparing me for her succession
"My mother was preparing me for her succession."

In this example, the subject (*ʔummy*, my mother) comes first, and the verb (*tuḥaḍḍirny*, preparing) comes next, showing an SV word order.

Example 2 (VS): KK tells how her son tried to convince her that he wanted to live a luxurious life, like his peers from the upper classes of their society:

(2) *ḥāwal nawwāf yqniʕni ʔinnū yaʕĪš ʕĪša mutrafā*
tried Nawwaf convince me that he lives life luxurious
"Nawwaf tried to convince me to live a luxurious life."

In example 2, the verb (*ḥāwal*, tried) comes first, whereas the subject (*nawwāf*, Nawwaf) comes next, showing a VS word order.

3.3.Morpholexical Class of Subject

The first factor analyzed was the role of the subject's morpholexical class in determining the preference in word order in spoken Saudi Arabic. Regarding morpholexical class, the study focused specifically on three main categories—nouns, pronouns, and pronominals—which were further classified into subdivisions. The noun subjects were classified as proper nouns, definite nouns, and indefinite nouns; the pronoun subjects as attached and detached pronouns; and the pronominals (e.g., *wahid, baʕḍ, had, kul*) had no further subdivisions. Table 2 illustrates the frequencies of the subjects' different morpholexical classes in the participants' speech.

Table 2
Morpholexical Classes of Subjects

Noun			Pronoun		Pronominal
PN	DN	IND	Attached	Detached	
37	77	19	82	55	21
13%	26%	7%	28%	19%	7%
46%			**47%**		**7%**
291					

Table 2 shows the three basic morpholexical classes of the subjects within the participants' speech: nouns and pronouns with their subdivisions as well as pronominals. The analysis found a 46% occurrence of noun subjects, comprising 37 proper noun tokens that make up 13% of total subject occurrences, 77 definite nouns (clearly more frequent at 26%), and 19 indefinite nouns (only 7%). Pronoun subjects accounted for 47% of subject occurrences, with the 82 attached pronouns (28%) being much more frequent than the 55 tokens for detached pronouns (19%). The third subject class, pronominals, yielded 21 tokens (7%). Pronoun subjects thus had the highest occurrence among all the subjects (47%), followed closely by noun subjects (46%), with pronominals occurring the least (7%). Examples of each category from the participants' speech are given below.

3.4. Noun Subjects

Spoken Arabic has three cases of noun subjects; they may be proper nouns, definite nouns (e.g., *the girl*), or indefinite nouns (e.g., *girl*) as seen in the following examples from the participants' speech.

a. Proper noun:

Example 3 (PN): The presenter asks MA how he perceives his rank among all Saudi singers today. MA starts his answer by repeating the question:

(3) *muḥammad ʕabdu yʕṭy nafsū trtĪb bĪn ʔalfnnānĪn …*
Mohammed Abdu give himself ranking between the artists
"Mohammed Abdu ranks himself among the artists … ."

In example 3, exhibiting the SV word order, the subject (*muḥammad ʕabdu*, Mohammed Abdu) is a proper noun, which comes first, followed by the verb (*yʕṭy*, gives).

b. Definite noun:

Example 4 (DN): DS talks about the best Saudi talk show TV programs and assures the interviewer (metaphorically) that all of them are the same, that is, there are no big differences between them:

(4) *ʔar-rʔūs titsāwā kulluhum ḥwl baʕḍuhum*
the heads are equal all of them around themselves
"The heads are equal; they are all alike."

In example 4, which follows the SV word order, the subject (*ʔar-rʔūs*, the heads) is a definite noun and comes first, followed by the verb (*ttsāwā*, equal).

c. Indefinite noun:

Example 5 (IND): KA stresses that Shi'as have irrational beliefs, unbelievable minds, and lie to themselves and believe their lies:

(5) *ʕqūl mā tfakkir lʔannhā tmma sariqathā*
minds not think because they stolen
"Minds that do not think because they were stolen [brain-washed]."

Example 5 shows the subject, an indefinite noun (*ʕqūl*, minds) coming first, followed by the verb (*tfakkir*, think), demonstrating an SV word order.

3.5.Pronoun Subjects

Table 2 shows two categories of pronoun subjects, which may be attached to the verb or detached as shown in the next examples.

a. Attached pronoun:

Example 6: SN tells the story of his registration in Al-Helal soccer club when he needed his father's ID to register in the club but was initially afraid to tell him:

(6) *saḥabt ʔat-tābʕiyā min taḥt wisādit ʔabuya*
pulled ID card from under pillow father
"I pulled the ID card from under my father's pillow."

In example 6, the subject pronoun (*t*, I) is attached to the verb (*saḥab*, pulled) and becomes one word (*saḥabt*). As the example makes clear, the word order is VS.

b. Detached pronoun:

Example 7: KK refers to the suffering and terror she experienced when her son was taken to the hospital after a serious health problem:

(7) *ʔanā ʔatkallim maʕak bṣwra šxṣyya*
I talk to you with picture personal
"I am talking to you of a personal matter."

In example 7, the pronoun (*ʔanā*, I) comes first, followed by the verb (*ʔatkallim*, talk). The example clearly shows an SV word order.

3.6.Pronominal Subjects

The third class of nouns shown in Table 2 is the pronominal, such as *baʕḍ, had,* and *kul*, similar to the English words *some*, *one*, *each*, *all*, and so on.

Example 8: KA went to receive condolences for her mother's death. She was surprised by her bad reception from the male attendants, as they severely criticized her for converting to Sunni:

(8) *baʕḍ ʔar-riğāl ʔintabahū li taḥaluq ʔan-nisaʔ ḥawly*
some the men aware of wrapping the women around me
"Some men became aware that women were wrapping around me."

In example 8, which follows an SV word order, the pronominal (*baʕḍ ʔar-riğāl*, some men) is the subject and comes first in the sentence, followed by the verb (*ʔintabahū*, became aware).

3.7.Discourse Function

The second analyzed factor was the role of the subject's discourse function in determining the preference in word order in spoken Saudi Arabic. Regarding the discourse function, the study specifically examined two dichotomous main categories: new versus given and general versus specific. The discourse function *new* refers to the subject being mentioned

for the first time in the participant's discourse, whereas *given* refers to a subject that has been mentioned before in the discourse. *General* refers to a general subject, which can be anyone in the global social context of the speaker, whereas *specific* refers to an exact referent in the mind of the speaker. Table 3 illustrates the frequencies of the subjects' various discourse functions in the participants' speech.

Table 3
Subjects' Discourse Functions in the Saudi Arabic Spoken Discourses

New	Given	General	Specific
139	152	48	243
48%	52%	16%	84%
291		**291**	

As shown in Table 3, the analysis found 139 new subject occurrences (48%) versus 152 given subject (52%) occurrences and 48 general subject occurrences (16%) versus a much higher 243 specific subject occurrences (84%). The following examples from the participants' speech represent the subjects' different discourse functions.

3.8.New Versus Given

Example 9 (New): The speaker SN describes the coach of Al-Helal soccer club watching the players from his office:

(9) *ğorğ smiṯ ynāẓrnā min ʔalšibāk*
George Smith looking at us from the window
"George Smith is watching us from the window."

In example 9, which follows an SV word order, the sentence marks the first time the subject (George Smith) appears within SA's discourse; in other words, the subject here is considered new in the discourse.

Example 10 (Given): DS explains the reason for the high salaries of talk show presenters in Egypt:

(10) *ʔint ttkallam ʕan tisʕeen milyūn mušāhid fi miṣr*
you talking about 90 million viewer in Egypt
"You are talking about 90 million viewers in Egypt."

In this example, which follows an SV word order, DS is talking to the TV presenter (*ʔint*, you), who is the subject in this sentence. It is not the first time that DS had addressed him in his speech. Thus, the presenter (subject) was already an element in the discourse, so the subject is considered given, not new.

3.9.General Versus Specific

Example 11 (General): KA stresses the seriousness of the Shi'a Imams' speeches and their negative impact on Muslims' minds:

(11) *xiṭābāt taġsil ʕuqūl ʔalmuslim*
speeches wash minds of the Muslim
"Speeches that wash the Muslims' minds."

Example 11, which follows an SV word order, illustrates the case of a general subject (*xiṭābāt*, speeches) that refers to all the religious speeches given by the Imams.

Example 12 (Specific): KK tells the story of when her son went to the USA to continue his study abroad:

(12) *ʔibny nawwāf ʕamal ʔalṣaf ʔalṯāliṯ ʔalṯānawy*
my son Nawwaf made the third grade secondary
"My son Nawwaf completed his high school education."

In example 12, which follows an SV word order, the subject (*ʔibny nawwāf*, my son) is considered specific because he is referred to by name, and KK refers to him as her son.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis yielded interesting findings regarding the preference of word order choice among Saudi speakers of Arabic. The findings show that diverse factors influenced the participants' choice of word order when speaking, mainly the different morpholexical classes of the subject and its different discourse functions. Table 4 illustrates the respective frequencies of the SV and VS word orders according to the different morpholexical classes of the subjects in the participants' speech.

Table 4
Comparison of Morpholexical Classes in Both SV and VS Word Order

SV						VS					
Noun			Pronoun		Pronominal	Noun			Pronoun		Pronominal
PN	DN	IND	Att.	D-Att.		PN	DN	IND	Att.	D-Att.	
26	55	16	2	52	19	11	22	3	80	3	2
15.3%	32.4%	9.4%	1.1%	30.6%	11.2%	9.1%	18.2%	2.5%	66.1%	2.4%	1.7%
57.1%			**31.7%**		**11.2%**	**29.8%**			**68.5%**		**1.7%**
100%						**100%**					
170						**121**					
58.4 %						**41.6 %**					

Table 4 shows that the uses of SV were significantly higher than those of VS in the spoken Saudi Arabic discourses. If we compare nouns in both the SV and VS categories, we find them clearly more common (58.4%) in SV in all cases (proper, definite, and indefinite noun) than in VS (41.6%). There is also a significant difference in pronoun use between SV and VS word order; very few pronouns with attached subjects appear in SV sentences (2 tokens), whereas a great many appear in VS sentences (80 tokens). In contrast, a high number of pronouns with detached subjects occur in SV (52 tokens) and a significantly lower number in VS (3 tokens). It is important to draw attention here to the greater frequency of attached pronouns among all pronoun occurrences in the spoken Arabic (combining both SV and VS order): 82 tokens for attached pronouns compared to only 55 tokens for detached pronouns. Moreover, regarding pronominals, there was a significant difference in their use between SV and VS: 11% in SV but only 2% in VS.

These results align with some findings of Owens et al. (2009, p. 8), who suggest that the morpholexical class of Arabic subjects correlates significantly with subject-verb or verb-subject word order. According to those authors, pronouns appear to cluster in one order as do pronominals (i.e., 90% SV); lexical nouns, in contrast, show considerable variation between SV and VS orders (60% SV). In the current research, however, pronouns and lexical nouns showed considerable variation, with 39% of pronouns being associated with SV versus 61% associated with VS; similarly, 73% of lexical nouns were associated with SV, whereas 90% of pronominals (as in Owens et al.'s findings) were associated with SV. Owens et al. also found

that the percentage of proper nouns in their entire corpus was 81% SV versus 19% VS; similarly, in the current research, proper nouns were 70% in SV order versus 30% in VS. Furthermore, Owens et al. show that definite nouns significantly favor SV, whereas indefinite nouns favor VS order. In their research (p. 8), definite nouns were 65% SV versus 35% VS, which is very close to the present study's results of 71% SV versus 29% VS. However, the results of the current research differ drastically from Owens et al.'s (2009) findings regarding indefinite nouns; those authors found that indefinite nouns were 36% SV versus 64% VS, whereas they were 84% SV versus 16% VS in the current study.

Table 5 shows the frequencies of the SV and VS word orders according to the subjects' different discourse functions in the participants' speech.

Table 5

Comparison of Discourse Functions Between VS and SV Word Order

SV				VS			
New	**Given**	**General**	**Specific**	**New**	**Given**	**General**	**Specific**
94	76	42	128	45	76	6	115
55%	45%	25%	75%	37%	63%	5%	95%
100%		**100%**		**100%**		**100%**	
170		**170**		**121**		**121**	

Table 5 shows the difference between cases of new versus given subject in SV and VS word order in the participants' speech. The researcher found that new subjects occurred at a higher rate (55%) in the SV cases than did given subjects (45%). In contrast, in VS order, given subjects occurred at a 63% rate, significantly higher than the 37% rate for new cases.

Table 5 also shows a slight yet significant difference between general and specific subjects in both SV and VS orders. Concerning SV word order, specific subjects accounted for 75%, significantly higher than general subjects at only 25%. In contrast, in the VS order, the specific subjects were significantly higher at 95% than general subjects at 5%, so we can conclude that spoken Saudi Arabic discourses highly favor VS order when referring to a specific subject.

In addition, concerning the overall discourse function of the subjects as a significant factor in the speaker's choice of word order, the results of the current study are similar to the findings of Owens et al. (2009), who found that general subjects favor SV, whereas specific ones favor VS word order. More specifically, they found that the frequency of general subjects between SV and VS was 69% SV versus 31% VS, whereas in the current research, it was 88% SV versus 12% VS. The findings differ concerning specific subjects, which were 49% SV versus 51% VS in Owens et al.'s study but 53% SV versus 47% VS in the current research. Those authors further explain that the same word can be general in one context and specific in another. However, the present study's findings are inconsistent with those of Owens et al.'s study regarding the new versus given discourse function. Owens et al. found that a prominent function of VS order is to introduce new referents into the discourse, with given referents being more likely to occur in SV than in VS format. However, in the current study, new referents showed a higher SV word order (55%), whereas given referents favored VS order (63%).

On the basis of these findings, the present author contends that the results lend support to the view that both morpholexical and discourse-pragmatic factors influence word order in spoken Arabic. These findings agree with the conclusion of Naro and Votre (1999), who assert

that there exists a "nonrandom" intersection between information status and morpholexical class in determining word order.

All in all, the data analysis yielded interesting findings concerning spoken Arabic word order preferences. The results significantly support an emerging divergence from the general belief that although Arabic is a flexible language that allows both SV and VS word orders, Arabic language speakers exhibit an overall tendency or preference for using VS word order in their speech (AlQahtani & Sabourin, 2015). According to various scholars, speakers may prefer a VS order due to the influence of the SA structure in which the VS order dominates (Alduais, 2012). In his study, Alduais (2012) found that less than a quarter of the SA sentences were nominal ones, that is, following the SV order, whereas more than three-quarters of sentences were verbal sentences, following VS order. Moreover, the present researcher believes that the emerging trend among Arabic speakers to shift toward the SV word order is consistent with the claims of Greenberg (1966, as cited in El-Yasin, 1985), who contends that languages exhibiting a VSO structure constitute a minority among the world languages and that a change in word order is expected to be in the direction of the more common SVO order. The present researcher believes that this emerging trend may be attributed to the introduction of English as a compulsory subject, now taught in all government and private Saudi schools starting at the elementary level. The fixed word structure of English (SV), the researcher believes, may be a cause of this shift in spoken Arabic away from the classical and more dominant Arabic VS order. This result is also consistent with El-Yasin (1985, p. 107), who provides evidence that Arabic is one of the languages changing from VS in its classical form into an SV language.

5. CONCLUSION

The current study investigated whether a subject's pragmatic factors (morpholexical and discourse) play a role in determining the variable subject-verb word order in spoken Saudi Arabic. Concerning the first research question, the distributions of SV/VS word orders in spoken Saudi Arabic proved to be close, with a slightly higher percentage in SV word order (58% SV vs. 42% VS). Regarding the second research question, the subjects' morpholexical class was found to be a significant factor in predicting word order in spoken Saudi Arabic. The findings also prove that discourse-pragmatic functions play an important role in predicting word order in spoken Saudi Arabic.

The findings offer significant implications for EFL educators, who can regard the findings as possible reasons for the difficulties students face when learning English as a foreign language. Such learners' mistakes when applying English grammatical structures may be due to the transfer of the dual word order of spoken Arabic. The author recommends that, to confirm the findings of this research, further similar studies be conducted on a larger scale including, for example, with different age groups, different genders, and even other regional dialects of spoken Arabic.

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