



Universidad Nacional de Catamarca - Facultad de Humanidades
Instituto de Investigación en Teorías del Arte y Estética
Revista Rigel – ISSN 2525-1945.

Sentence Structure in Arabic and English: A Comparative Linguistic Study of Constituents Order and Grammatical Agreement

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Received: 29/06/2026

Accepted: 09/08/2026

Published: 23/08/2026

Abstract

Sentence structure provides one of the clearest areas in which languages reveal both their similarities and their structural differences. This article examines sentence structure in Standard Arabic and English from a comparative linguistic perspective, with particular attention to constituent order and grammatical agreement. English is predominantly characterized by Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) order in ordinary declarative clauses, whereas Standard Arabic permits both Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) and Verb–Subject–Object (VSO) configurations. The comparison becomes more significant when subject–verb agreement is taken into account. Arabic displays a relatively rich verbal inflectional system involving person, number, and gender, and the form of the verb may vary according to the position of the subject. English, by contrast, has a more restricted system of overt verbal agreement and relies comparatively heavily on constituent order in the identification of grammatical functions. The article also considers the contribution of case marking in Arabic and examines the interaction between syntax and morphology in both languages. It argues that the difference between Arabic and English cannot be reduced to a simple contrast between “free” and “fixed” word order. Rather, the two languages employ different combinations of syntactic and morphological resources to organize grammatical relations. The comparison ultimately shows that constituent order and agreement are closely connected phenomena and should be examined together in comparative studies of sentence structure.

Keywords: Arabic syntax; English syntax; constituent order; SVO; VSO; grammatical agreement; subject–verb agreement; comparative linguistics; Standard Arabic.

Introduction

Sentence structure is a central concern of linguistic analysis because it determines how the principal elements of a clause are organized and how grammatical relations are established. Languages may express broadly similar meanings while differing considerably in the structural means through which those meanings are encoded. Constituent order, verbal morphology, case marking, and grammatical agreement may therefore combine in different ways from one language to another.

Arabic and English offer a particularly useful basis for comparison. English is predominantly an SVO language in ordinary declarative clauses, while Standard Arabic allows both SVO and VSO patterns. This difference is immediately visible at the surface level, but its linguistic significance becomes clearer when constituent order is considered together with agreement and morphology.¹

The contrast is especially relevant in Arabic because the position of the subject may correlate with a change in the form of the verb. A preverbal plural subject normally triggers fuller verbal agreement, whereas a postverbal plural subject may occur with a singular verb form.² English does not exhibit an equivalent alternation in ordinary declarative clauses.

The central question addressed in this article is therefore not simply whether Arabic and English place their constituents in the same order. The more important question is how constituent order interacts with grammatical agreement in each language and what this interaction reveals about the organization of the clause.

The study focuses on Standard Arabic and standard written English. It does not attempt to provide a comprehensive account of either language, nor does it treat all Arabic dialects as structurally identical. The purpose is narrower: to compare the principal patterns relevant to constituent order and subject–verb agreement and to identify the grammatical mechanisms that distinguish the two systems.

The article proceeds from the assumption that word order should not be studied as an isolated sequence of words. Constituent position may be associated with grammatical function, while morphological marking may provide additional information about the relations between constituents. A comparison that takes these dimensions together can therefore provide a more accurate account of the structural relationship between Arabic and English.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Constituent Order

The terms Subject (S), Verb (V), and Object (O) are widely used in linguistic description to characterize the linear order of major clause constituents. An SVO clause places the subject before the verb and the object after it, whereas a VSO clause places the verb before the subject and the object.

These labels are useful descriptive tools, but they do not constitute a complete explanation of sentence structure. A language may allow more than one constituent order without permitting unrestricted rearrangement. Similarly, two languages may share an SVO pattern while relying on different grammatical mechanisms to identify the relations between their constituents.

English illustrates this point. SVO is the predominant order in ordinary declarative clauses, but English also permits other configurations in questions, passive constructions, topicalization, and other structures.³ The existence of these constructions does not invalidate its characterization as predominantly SVO.

The same distinction is necessary for Arabic. The possibility of both VSO and SVO does not make Arabic a language in which constituents can be freely placed in any position. The available configurations are subject to grammatical restrictions and may be associated with differences in agreement and interpretation.

Consequently, the present study uses “constituent order” rather than “word order” as its principal term. The former emphasizes the syntactic organization of larger units rather than the simple succession of individual words.

2.2. Grammatical Agreement

Grammatical agreement involves the expression of shared grammatical features between syntactically related elements. Number, person, and gender are among the features most commonly involved in agreement systems, although their morphological realization varies considerably across languages.

Arabic provides a relatively rich example of verbal inflection. The Arabic verb may encode person, number, and gender. English also has subject–verb agreement, but the number of overt distinctions expressed on ordinary lexical verbs is much smaller.

The difference is consequently not one between a language with agreement and a language without it. Both languages have agreement; the relevant issue is the extent of morphological marking and the way agreement interacts with constituent structure.

3. CONSTITUENT ORDER IN STANDARD ARABIC

3.1.VSO and SVO

Standard Arabic permits both VSO and SVO configurations. Consider the following example:

كَتَبَ الطَّالِبُ الدَّرْسَ.

Kataba al-ṭālibu al-darsa.

"The student wrote the lesson".

The sentence displays a VSO order: the verb precedes the subject, which in turn precedes the object.

Arabic also permits:

الطَّالِبُ كَتَبَ الدَّرْسَ.

Al-ṭālibu kataba al-darsa.

"The student wrote the lesson".

The second sentence has an SVO order.

The availability of these two configurations is well established in descriptions of Arabic grammar and in contemporary linguistic studies. Traditional Arabic grammar approaches the distinction partly through the categories of verbal and nominal sentences, while modern syntactic research examines it in relation to clause structure, subject position, and agreement.⁴

It would nevertheless be misleading to conclude that the two configurations are simply interchangeable versions of one structure. Their grammatical behavior is not entirely identical, particularly with respect to verbal agreement.

3.2.The VSO Pattern and Agreement

The relationship between VSO order and agreement becomes particularly clear with plural subjects:

كَتَبَ الطُّلَّابُ الدَّرْسَ.

Kataba al-ṭullābu al-darsa.

"The students wrote the lesson".

The subject is masculine plural, yet the verb occurs in the singular masculine form kataba.

When the same subject precedes the verb, the verbal morphology changes:

الطُّلَّابُ كَتَبُوا الدَّرْسَ.

Al-ṭullābu katabū al-darsa.

"The students wrote the lesson".

Here the verb carries the masculine plural form katabū.

The contrast can therefore be represented as:

SVO. الطُّلَّابُ كَتَبُوا الدَّرْسَ.

VSO. كَتَبَ الطُّلَّابُ الدَّرْسَ.

The lexical subject and the basic semantic relation remain the same, while the verbal morphology changes with constituent order.

This agreement asymmetry has played an important role in analyses of Arabic syntax. Contemporary accounts examine it in relation to subject position and the structure of the clause, while traditional grammatical descriptions provide detailed observations concerning the relationship between the verb and its subject.⁵

3.3. Case Marking

Case marking constitutes another important component of Arabic sentence structure. In formal Arabic, nouns may exhibit nominative, accusative, and genitive marking, and these distinctions can contribute to the identification of grammatical functions.

In:

كَتَبَ الطَّالِبُ الدَّرْسَ.

the subject al-ṭālibu is nominative, while al-darsa is accusative.

This morphological information provides a grammatical cue that is much less extensively available in modern English nominal morphology.

The importance of case is well established in traditional Arabic grammar. 'Abbās Ḥasan's *Al-Naḥw al-Wāfī* offers an extensive treatment of inflection and syntactic functions, while al-Ghalāyīnī's *Jāmi' al-Durūs al-'Arabiyya* provides a systematic presentation of Arabic grammatical categories.⁶

Modern linguistic analysis uses different theoretical terminology, but the descriptive fact remains important: Arabic may employ both constituent position and morphological marking in the identification of grammatical relations.

4. CONSTITUENT ORDER IN ENGLISH

4.1. The Predominance of SVO

English predominantly uses SVO order in ordinary declarative clauses:

The student wrote the lesson.

The researcher analyzed the results.

In such sentences, the subject precedes the verb and the object follows it.

The importance of this arrangement is partly related to the relatively limited case marking of ordinary English nouns. Consider the following pair:

The teacher praised the student.

The student praised the teacher.

The same nouns occur in both sentences, but their grammatical functions change when their positions are reversed. Constituent order therefore plays a major role in the interpretation of ordinary English transitive clauses.

Descriptions of English grammar consistently identify SVO as the dominant pattern, while also recognizing the existence of other structures.⁷

4.2. Alternative English Constructions

SVO should not be understood as an absolute rule. English permits variations associated with particular syntactic constructions.

For example:

Did the student read the book?

The auxiliary appears before the subject as part of interrogative formation.

In:

The book was read by the student.

the passive construction changes the distribution of grammatical functions.

These examples demonstrate that a language may have a dominant constituent order without restricting all sentences to that order.

The comparison with Arabic should therefore be made at equivalent structural levels. The Arabic VSO pattern is an ordinary grammatical configuration in relevant declarative structures, whereas English inversion in questions has a different grammatical motivation.

4.3. Subject-Verb Agreement

English subject–verb agreement is morphologically less extensive than Arabic verbal agreement. Compare:

The student reads the article.

The students read the article.

The third-person singular form reads contrasts with the plural form read.

The verb be displays a larger set of forms:

I am ready.

The student is ready.

The students are ready.

Nevertheless, English lexical verbs do not normally encode grammatical gender. The form wrote, for instance, remains unchanged regardless of whether its subject is masculine or feminine.

Hudson's study of English subject–verb agreement demonstrates that agreement remains an important component of English grammar despite its relatively restricted morphological realization.⁸

5. ARABIC AND ENGLISH: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

5.1. Constituent Order

The first major contrast concerns the range and grammatical significance of constituent order.

English strongly favors SVO in ordinary declarative clauses:

The students read the book.

Standard Arabic allows:

الطُّلَّابُ قَرَأُوا الْكِتَابَ.

and:

قَرَأَ الطُّلَّابُ الْكِتَابَ.

The first Arabic sentence is SVO, whereas the second is VSO.

Thus, both languages permit an SVO configuration, but Arabic additionally makes systematic use of VSO in relevant structures. More importantly, the difference in Arabic is connected with verbal agreement.

5.2. Agreement

Agreement provides the clearest point of structural contrast.

Arabic:

الطُّلَّابُ كَتَبُوا الدَّرْسَ.

"The students wrote the lesson".

كَتَبَ الطُّلَّابُ الدَّرْسَ.

"The students wrote the lesson".

The first construction shows plural agreement, while the second contains a singular verb with a plural postverbal subject.

English:

The students wrote the lesson.

The verb wrote remains unchanged regardless of any hypothetical change in constituent order because ordinary English declarative syntax does not provide an equivalent VSO alternative.

This difference indicates that Arabic constituent order and agreement are closely connected. The relationship is not merely a matter of stylistic preference but forms part of the grammatical organization of the clause.⁹

5.3. Gender

Arabic verbal morphology also marks gender:

كَتَبَ الطَّالِبُ الدَّرْسَ.

كَتَبَتِ الطَّالِبَةُ الدَّرْسَ.

The masculine and feminine forms differ morphologically.

English does not normally express this distinction through the verb:

The student wrote the lesson.

The verbal form wrote is identical in both cases.

The comparison therefore reveals a wider morphological distinction between the two languages.

5.4. Number

The difference is also evident in the treatment of number. Arabic distinguishes singular, dual, and plural, while ordinary English grammatical number primarily contrasts singular and plural.

The Arabic dual therefore represents a grammatical distinction that does not have a direct equivalent in ordinary English subject–verb agreement.

This observation is significant because it illustrates a general principle of comparative linguistics: grammatical categories cannot always be mapped from one language onto another on a one-to-one basis.

5.5. Case and the Identification of Grammatical Functions

The contribution of case further strengthens the contrast.

Arabic:

مَدَحَ الْمُعَلِّمُ الطَّالِبَ.

The nominative marking on al-mu'allimu and the accusative marking on al-ṭāliba provide morphological information concerning grammatical function.

English:

The teacher praised the student.

Here the positions of the noun phrases provide the principal overt indication of their grammatical functions.

The distinction should not be exaggerated. English retains some morphological case distinctions, particularly in pronouns, while Arabic also makes use of constituent order. The relevant point is that the two languages assign different weights to morphology and constituent position in the encoding of grammatical relations.

6 .THE INTERACTION BETWEEN SYNTAX AND MORPHOLOGY

The preceding comparison suggests that the most significant difference between Arabic and English is not the existence of different word orders by itself, but the relationship between constituent order and morphological realization.

In English, relatively stable SVO order is an important mechanism for identifying grammatical functions. In Arabic, constituent order operates together with case marking and a richer system of verbal inflection.

The agreement alternation illustrates this relationship particularly clearly:

SVO:

الطُّلَّابُ كَتَبُوا الدَّرْسَ.

VSO:

كَتَبَ الطُّلَّابُ الدَّرْسَ.

The same semantic participants occur in both constructions, but the form of the verb changes.

This fact has made agreement an important diagnostic in the study of Arabic clause structure. Aoun, Benmamoun, and Choueiri treat clause structure, subjects, and sentential agreement as closely related components of Arabic syntax.¹⁰

The comparison consequently supports an analysis in which syntax and morphology are not treated as independent layers of description. Constituent position can affect the realization of morphological features, while morphological marking can contribute to the identification of syntactic relations.

This is also why it is preferable to avoid describing Arabic simply as a “free-word-order language.” The availability of VSO and SVO does not imply unrestricted freedom. Each configuration occurs within a system of grammatical constraints, and the change in order may be accompanied by a change in agreement.

7. DISCUSSION

The comparison of Arabic and English reveals both a structural contrast and an important commonality.

The contrast lies primarily in the distribution of grammatical information. English relies comparatively heavily on constituent position, especially in ordinary transitive clauses. Arabic combines constituent order with morphological case and richer verbal inflection.

The commonality is that neither language can be adequately described through constituent order alone. English SVO does not account for interrogative, passive, or other constructions, just as Arabic VSO and SVO do not explain the full organization of the Arabic clause.

The Arabic agreement asymmetry is particularly instructive because it demonstrates that a change in constituent order may have morphological consequences. This property distinguishes the Arabic system from English and provides a useful basis for comparative research.

It is therefore more accurate to describe the two languages as employing different balances between syntactic ordering and morphological marking rather than to classify one as “fixed” and the other as “free”.

From a broader linguistic perspective, the comparison illustrates the importance of examining several grammatical dimensions simultaneously. Constituent order, agreement, case, and grammatical function interact to produce the observable structure of the sentence. A comparison restricted to SVO and VSO labels would capture only the surface of the phenomenon.

The analysis also has implications for language teaching. Learners who approach Arabic through English may expect subject-first organization to be the normal basis of every declarative clause. Conversely, learners of English with an Arabic background may transfer expectations concerning verbal morphology or constituent flexibility. Awareness of the structural relationship between word order and agreement can therefore help explain recurrent difficulties in comparative grammar

8. CONCLUSION

This article has examined sentence structure in Standard Arabic and English with particular emphasis on constituent order and grammatical agreement.

The comparison has shown that English predominantly employs SVO order in ordinary declarative clauses, whereas Standard Arabic permits both SVO and VSO configurations. The difference becomes more significant when agreement is considered. In Arabic, the position of a plural subject may correlate with a difference in verbal morphology, producing fuller agreement in preverbal structures and reduced agreement in postverbal structures.

English also possesses subject-verb agreement, but its overt morphological expression is considerably more restricted. English does not exhibit an equivalent agreement alternation associated with VSO and SVO order.

The study has further shown that Arabic case marking contributes to the identification of grammatical functions, while English depends more heavily on constituent position in ordinary transitive clauses.

The central conclusion is therefore that the structural difference between Arabic and English cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between two word-order patterns. The more revealing contrast concerns the way each language distributes grammatical information across syntax and morphology.

Arabic demonstrates a particularly close relationship between constituent order and verbal agreement, while English illustrates a stronger reliance on constituent position within a comparatively restricted inflectional system. Both languages, however, show that sentence structure is a multidimensional phenomenon in which syntax, morphology, and grammatical relations interact.

A comparative study of Arabic and English is consequently most productive when it moves beyond the enumeration of SVO and VSO patterns and examines the grammatical mechanisms underlying those patterns. Such an approach provides a more precise account of the similarities and differences between the two languages and offers a stronger foundation for further comparative research.

ENDNOTES

- .1Joseph E. Aoun, Elabbas Benmamoun, and Lina Choueiri, *The Syntax of Arabic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), especially chaps. 2–4.
- .2Ibid., 73–95.
- .3Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- .4Aoun, Benmamoun, and Choueiri, *The Syntax of Arabic*, 12–72.
- .5Ibid., 73–95.
- .6‘Abbās Ḥasan, *Al-Naḥw al-Wāfī*, 4 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif); Muṣṭafā al-Ghalāyīnī, *Jāmi‘ al-Durūs al-‘Arabiyya*, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya)
- .7Huddleston and Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*.
- .8Richard Hudson, “Subject–Verb Agreement in English,” *English Language & Linguistics* 3, no. 2 (1999): 173–207
- .9Elabbas Benmamoun, “VSO Word Order, Primarily in Arabic Languages,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Syntax*, 2nd ed., ed. Martin Everaert and Henk C. van Riemsdijk (Wiley)
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- .11Karin C. Ryding, *A Reference Grammar of Modern Standard Arabic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)
- .12Elabbas Benmamoun, *The Feature Structure of Functional Categories: A Comparative Study of Arabic Dialects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)
- .13Muḥammad Ḥamāsa ‘Abd al-Laṭīf, Aḥmad Mukhtār ‘Umar, and Muṣṭafā al-Naḥḥās Zahrān, *Al-Naḥw al-Asāsī* (Kuwait: Dhāt al-Salāsīl, 1994)
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- .15Bernard Comrie, *Language Universals and Linguistic Typology*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

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