

*The Structure and Construction of a Latin Sentence:  
Word-Form vs. Word-Order*

One of the most important things to learn in beginning to learn the Latin language is the way in which a Latin sentence is *composed*, the way in which it is *put together*, the way in which it is *constructed*. This is important *both* because it is so basic to Latin itself *and* because it is so different from the way in which an English sentence is constructed—so much so, that when a native speaker of English is learning Latin, he must at once be learning *a way of orienting and organizing his mind that differs markedly from his custom*. Since we think and speak and write in *sentences*, and since we likewise, therefore, hear and read *sentences*, the structure of our minds and of our experience of the world is to that extent influenced, if it is not wholly determined, by the way in which we are *accustomed to structuring*, and to hearing and seeing *structured*, the sentences in which we think, speak, and write, and the written and spoken sentences of others that we hear and read.

Although English allows some room for variation in its way of building a sentence, that is, in its way of arranging the words that make up the sentence, most English declarative sentences state the subject first, then the verb, then the direct object (sometimes preceded by an indirect object) or the complement or a prepositional phrase or some other adverbial construction. The following are examples of typical English sentences:

**The sun warms the earth.**

**The child gives her mother a gift.**

**The heavens are majestic.**

**The wind whistles through the crack.**

**The dog runs fast.**

In every instance the underlying structure is based on the Subject – Verb pattern: first the subject, then the verb, then the remaining elements of the sentence. The patterning principles, the principles of arrangement in accordance with which an intelligible sentence can be constructed in a particular language constitute the *syntax* of that language. The word *syntax* stems from the Greek word ἡ σύνταξις (*hē sýntaxis*), which means a “putting into order”, an “arranging”, or the resultant “order” or “arrangement”.

Reconsidering the final sentence in the list above, we would certainly say, “The dog runs fast,” *not* “Fast the dog runs” or “Fast runs the dog” or “Runs the dog fast” or “Runs fast the dog”. If we spoke employing these latter four arrangements, we might well be understood, but we would likely sound somewhat odd to ourselves, and we would certainly sound odd to others, perhaps quite odd; we might be understood, but we would likely create some uncertainty about our meaning in the mind of our listener or reader; or we might not be understood at all; and, in the case of the fourth and fifth examples, we might be supposed to be asking a *question* rather than making a *statement*. It is certainly true, that unusual patterns of arrangement can sometimes produce interesting or pleasing stylistic effects. Consider the third arrangement, for example, “Fast runs the dog”. In the right context, this way of ordering the sentence might be felt to be quite charming. If we retain the pattern but vary the contents, this may become even more apparent: “Bubbly babbles the burbling brook.” Nonetheless, this is an exceptional way of constructing an English sentence. Although it is intelligible and may be pleasing, it is not customary. In our original example, the far and away usual manner of arranging the sentence would be, “The dog runs fast.”

Take, now, the sentence, “The dog sees the lion.” This, too, follows the usual pattern of a typical English sentence, namely, Subject – Verb – Direct Object. If we merely reverse the order, however, and say, “The lion sees the dog,” we still have an *intelligible* sentence, but we have changed the *meaning* of the sentence considerably. No speaker of English will have difficulty understanding the new sentence, but he will understand something quite different from his understanding of the first arrangement. If we proceed to alter the order of the words still further and say, “Sees the dog the lion,” it is likely either that we will leave the listener or reader in doubt about what is *seeing* and what is *being seen* or that we will seem to be asking a somewhat oddly worded *question* meant to be equivalent to “Does the dog see the lion?” Our being understood to be making a *statement* describing a state of affairs in which the dog is seeing and the lion is being seen depends upon our employing the usual English word-order, Subject – Verb – Direct Object, namely, “The dog sees the lion.”

Latin is quite different from English in this respect. Whereas the intelligibility of an *English* sentence depends almost exclusively upon the *order* of its words, the intelligibility of a *Latin* sentence depends instead upon the *form* of its words; the *order* of the words in a *Latin* sentence is largely unimportant, so far as the basic *meaning* and *intelligibility* of the sentence are concerned. *Canis videt leonem* would mean, in English, “the dog sees the lion”, but so would *leonem videt canis*. If we rendered the latter Latin sentence in English following the principle of the *order* of its words, we would take it to mean, “The lion sees the dog,” and yet, in truth, as we have seen, it means the reverse, “the dog sees the lion”. Consider the following pairs of *English* wordings:

A

**The dog sees the lion.**

**The dog the lion sees.**

**Sees the dog the lion.**

B

**The lion sees the dog.**

**The lion the dog sees.**

**Sees the lion the dog.**

- In the first place, the sentences at the head of the two columns have two distinct meanings. In the first sentence in column A, the dog is seeing, the lion is being seen. In the first sentence in column B, the lion is seeing, the dog is being seen.
- In the second place, in *English*, these six wordings are the *only* possibilities for arranging the given collection of three English words, *dog*, *sees*, and *lion*.
- In the third place, only the arrangement at the head of each column is entirely *intelligible* as a *statement* in English, and only it is even *tolerable* as such. No one would ever say either, “The dog the lion sees” or “Sees the dog the lion” as an alternative and equivalent to “The dog sees the lion”.
- In the fourth place, and underlying all of the previous three considerations, both the *intelligibility* and the *tolerability* of the two leading sentences depend upon the *order* of their words. It is precisely the uninterpretable *order* of the second two sentences in each column that makes them unacceptable as English sentences.

Now consider the following pairs of *Latin* sentences:

A

***canis leonem videt.***

***leonem canis videt.***

***leonem videt canis.***

***videt leonem canis.***

***videt canis leonem.***

***canis videt leonem.***

B

***canem leo videt.***

***leo canem videt.***

***leo videt canem.***

***videt leo canem.***

***videt canem leo.***

***canem videt leo.***

- In the first place, just as was true of the English sentences, the sentences at the head of the two columns have two distinct meanings; but in the case of the Latin sentences, each of the following pairs also contains two *complete and correct sentences*, each member of each pair bearing a *clear meaning*, and each member of each pair bearing a meaning *clearly distinct from that of the other member*; moreover, *all* of the sentences in *one* of the two respective

columns mean *one identical* thing, while *all* in the *other* mean *another identical* thing. That is, despite the pronounced *differences* in the *order* of their words, all of the sentences in column A render the English sentence, “The dog sees the lion”; all of the sentences in column B render the English sentence, “The lion sees the dog”.

- In the second place, Latin allows *twelve* possible ways in which to combine the given collections of three words, *canis*, *videt*, and *leo*, twelve possible orderings of the words; whereas only six arrangements were possible in English.
- In the third place, all of the sentences in both of the columns, all of the several varying arrangements of their words, are entirely *intelligible* in Latin, and all are perfectly *tolerable*, although some might be *preferable* for a number of reasons that we will discuss elsewhere.
- In the fourth place, and underlying all of the previous three considerations, both the *intelligibility* and the *tolerability* of the thoroughgoing *variability* in the *order* of the Latin words depend upon the *constancy* of the *form* of the words in each of the respective columns. Despite the *variation* in the *order* of the words, the *form* of the nouns in column A is always the *same*, namely, *canis* and *leonem*; whereas in column B it is always *canem* and *leo*. It is the *identity* and *constancy* of the *form* of the words throughout the six sentences in column A that allows *all* of them to mean, “The dog sees the lion”. It is the *identity* and *constancy* of the *form* of the words throughout the six sentences in column B that allows all of them to mean, “The lion sees the dog”. It is the *difference* and *change* in the forms exhibited by the three words in one column in comparison with the forms of the *same* three words in the other column that allows the sentences in column A to mean one thing and those in column B to mean quite a different thing.

***The meaning and intelligibility of an English sentence depend largely upon word-order.***

***The meaning and intelligibility of a Latin sentence depend largely upon word-form.***

We can draw from this a practical guideline for translating a Latin sentence into English. As we have seen, an English sentence tends to begin with the subject and the verb and to follow

a fairly predictable order from there on out, whereas a Latin sentence can begin in almost any way at all and follow a rather unpredictable order as it proceeds. Moreover, the personal ending of a Latin verb gives us an immediate clue to the subject of the verb; and if there is a compatible noun in the nominative case, it provides us with a further clue. For all these reasons, when attempting to work out the meaning of a Latin sentence that is not immediately clear to us, we do well to find the main verb first and then determine its subject. Because of the typical Subject – Verb pattern in English, this combination of the subject and the verb gives us a secure beginning for the English sentence that we are attempting to bring forth from the Latin sentence.

Take the Latin sentence *urbem intrat turba*. If, without thinking, we allow our English habits of speech to guide us, we will set right in to take *urbem* as the subject, *intrat* as the verb, and *turba* as the direct object, thus, “A city enters the crowd”. In order to understand this sentence properly, however, we must take note that *urbem* is *accusative* in form and, as there is no preposition preceding it, is likely to be the *direct object*; that *urba* is *nominative* in form and *singular* and is likely to be the *subject*, inasmuch as the verb *intrat* is third person *singular* in form; so that rendered in English the sentence means not “A city enters the crowd” but “A crowd enters the city”, quite a different meaning.

This exemplifies in the case of a very simple sentence how important it is in learning Latin 1.) to learn the declensional forms of the noun (and adjective) and the conjugational forms of the verb very well; 2.) to learn to understand the grammatical significance of the several *cases* of the noun (and adjective) and of the several *tenses*, *moods*, and *voices* of the verb; 3.) to be ever *alert* and

*thinking* as we read or hear a Latin sentence; and 4.) to let our minds be governed by the principle of *word-form* in interpreting the Latin sentence. The more complex the sentence becomes, the more important these four guidelines become; and the more conscientiously we follow them, the more easily we will find our way through even rather complex sentences. Remember:

***The meaning and intelligibility of an English sentence depend largely upon word-order.***

***The meaning and intelligibility of a Latin sentence depend largely upon word-form.***

It is for this reason that when a native speaker of English studies Latin, he must learn to broaden and limber his habits of understanding, thinking, speaking, listening, reading, and writing. In order to do so, he must re-orient and re-organize his mind, in such a way as to begin to understand Latin according to the principle of *word-form* even while he continues, *at the same time*, to understand English according to the principle of *word-order*. As we have seen, English has very pronounced limits upon what it can tolerate by way of variation in word order. Nonetheless, it has greater flexibility in this area than appears in the way we *commonly* write and speak, hear and read, and in the way we *commonly* think and understand. As a consequence, one of the many things that studying Latin can teach us is *a greater freedom and flexibility of mind* resulting in *a larger, more variable command of our own language*, even *a greater precision in our thinking* and, indeed, *a greater elegance and aptness in the use of our own language*—but perhaps most importantly *a greater aptitude for finding our way to the truth*.