

*Latin Word Order: Structured Meaning and Information.* A. M. Devine and Laurence D. Stephens. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. xii + 639. ISBN 978-0-19-518168-5. \$98

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The linguists A. M. Devine and Laurence D. Stephens, who have written extensively on Ancient Greek, here turn their attention to Latin. The goal of the book is to explain the varying word orders within sentences of classical Latin prose, and its thesis is that this variation encodes pragmatic information. “Very roughly speaking, Latin word order is grammatically free but pragmatically fixed, while English word order is pragmatically free but grammatically fixed” (p. 23). That is, the difference between the two English sentences *The woman loves the cat* and *The cat loves the woman* is a grammatical difference: in each one, the first noun is the subject while the second is the direct object. In Latin, however, since the subject and object can be identified by their case forms, the word order is free to supply other information. The unmarked version of the above sentence, *Femina felem amat*, simply states the fact. In the order *Felem femina amat*, the direct object comes first, out of its normal place. This normally indicates a focus on the object: “it’s the CAT the woman loves (as opposed to, say, the canary).”

*Latin Word Order* is a dense and highly technical book, carefully untangling the various possible arrangements of Latin sentences. The theoretical framework is necessarily somewhat eclectic, because this work requires tools from various corners of linguistics and classical philology. The syntax is fairly standard, “essentially a sanitized version of pre-Minimalist syntax [along with] discourse functional projections” (pp. 7–8). For semantics, Devine and Stephens use the tripartite structure and structured meaning approaches (p. 8), with a quasi-mathematical notation in terms of quantifiers and predicates (explained pp. 17–24).<sup>1</sup> Devine and Stephens have organized the book so that readers can skip the most technical parts, which are mainly in separate sections called “Structural Analysis,” and Latinists who are not also linguists may prefer to skip those on a first reading. For those readers who are linguists but not Latinists, all the Latin examples are

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<sup>1</sup>The lambda abstraction notation used here is similar to, but not quite the same as, the way this notation is used for functions in combinatory logic. Readers familiar with this branch of mathematics or its applications in computer science may find the notation a bit confusing at first. Thus  $\lambda(x).Student(x)$  is used to mean “the set of all x such that x is a student.” In mathematical usage,  $\lambda(x).f(x)$  means “the function f whose bound variable is x”; it’s not a set but a way of indicating which symbols in a formula are variables. The more mathematical way of expressing what semanticists mean by their lambdas would be  $\{x : Student(x)\}$ .

translated, although the translations do not always indicate which English words represent the Latin features being studied.

To keep the problem to a manageable size, Devine and Stephens restrict their analysis to “the simple sentence in Classical prose” (p. 8). That is, the book (primarily) considers the order of constituents in the main clause, not the arrangement of clauses within sentences; the classical language, from Cato the Elder down to Seneca, not archaic, medieval, or modern Latin; and prose rather than verse. All of these restrictions are broken occasionally, and in particular there are examples from Plautus, Terence, Lucretius, Vergil, Horace, Tibullus, and Ovid. Nonetheless, as the authors point out, “the word order of verse is clearly a separate, though not unrelated, question” (p. 8). At the end of this review I will say a bit about the implications of this work for the study of Latin verse.

Devine and Stephens begin with verbs, naturally enough. The first chapter, “Arguments of Verbs,” covers the relative order of the various words that go along with a verb — its subject, objects, oblique arguments, and adverbial phrases. They conclude that the “default” word order of a Latin sentence is:

Subj DO IO/Obl Adj Goal/Source NRDO V

In other words the subject is first, followed in order by direct object, indirect object or oblique argument, adjunct, goal or source, and non-referential direct object, and finally the verb (p. 79). This is no surprise; any elementary textbook or handbook of prose composition will say as much. What’s more useful is to ask “why does the syntax present the arguments to the hearer in a specific order and not randomly, and why does it choose this particular order?” (p. 79), and also to ask under what conditions a speaker or writer will choose a non-default order. One way to attack the question is to consider which syntactic analyses best explain the Latin data. Devine and Stephens reject flat syntax, with no hierarchy among verb arguments, because this analysis does not account for the fact that Latin does have a default word order (p. 83). Complement syntax, too, though it can be useful for some Medieval Latin, “fails for Classical Latin” (p. 85) because it contradicts the apparent order of composition of arguments in Latin. Specifier syntax works better (pp. 87–97), because in this analysis we can see how “direct objects, indirect objects, and oblique arguments raise to specifier positions c-commanding the verb phrase” (p. 87) — that is, a Latin verb normally comes last because the arguments have raised over it.

On the other hand, sometimes the arguments or complements of the verb do not appear in the default order. This can happen when an argument is topicalized. Less emphatically, some constituents (adverbs, in particular) can be re-arranged to change their scope: does this adverb modify

just the verb, or the entire verb phrase? Devine and Stephens distinguish between argument raising, which is re-arrangement inside the verb phrase, and scrambling, which is movement out of the verb phrase (p. 108), normally to separate what is given or presupposed from the new information in the verb phrase (p. 109).

Different authors, though, have different preferences. Devine and Stephens compare Caesar, Livy, and Cato throughout the book. For example, they consider the phrase *castra ponit*, “pitch camp,” and its variations in tense (present, perfect) and number (he, they). In Caesar, this phrase is always in this order. In Livy, it is far more often in the opposite order, *ponit castra*. “Why are Caesar and Livy so different, if they both spoke the same language?” (p. 126) they ask. It’s hard to say *why* they are different, but it is possible to determine the conditions under which Livy writes a direct object after its verb: primarily when the noun is non-referential (as in *derigebant cursum*, Livy 37.27.1, cited p. 130) or when the noun is “tail material” (neither topic nor focus; old information, like focus, but not what the sentence is about; p. 17).

The second chapter, “Verb Positions,” looks at where the verb itself fits into the sentence. Although it is often in final position, it can be initial, second, or otherwise displaced. The verb may be first in a question, with the question particle *-ne* attached (p. 145). Imperatives and existential verbs also frequently come first (pp. 149, 150). These facts are familiar to beginning Latin students. Less familiar is the observation that psych verbs (verbs expressing feelings or mental state) also frequently come first in the sentence (p. 155). In particular, when a verb like *movet* “moves” refers to something physical, it is in the normal order, but when it is a psych verb (for example “the speech moves the hearers”), it is often initial. This phenomenon seems to be related to the “tight connection to the surrounding context” (p. 156) of psychological-state sentences.

The treatment of discourse particles in verb-initial sentences (pp. 157–163) is particularly good. These are the words like *igitur*, *etiam*, *enim*, *tamen* that explain the relationship of a sentence to those that have come before it. They often appear in second position, and in narrative these particles frequently come after an initial verb.

Most of this chapter is concerned with various functions of *est*: as an auxiliary with passive participles (for example, *interfectus est*, “he has been killed”), as a copula (for example, *Caesar est imperator*, “Caesar is a general”), or as an existential verb (for example, *est tribunus quidem*, “there is a certain tribune”). “There is a long tradition of looking to clisis” (p. 191) to account for the behavior of this verb, since most of its forms are phonologically enclitic, and the cognate or analogous verbs are syntactically enclitic

in many other languages (examples p. 191 and footnote 41 p. 223). Devine and Stephens, however, propose a different analysis. They suggest that the auxiliary “either stays in situ or raises to the head of a functional projection,” more specifically to the head of whatever projection is “the most important predication of the clause” (p. 194). Copular *est* has similar structures (p. 198); it may be last, the predicate may be raised over it, or the copula itself may be raised much as the auxiliary was. Finally, when *est* is existential, it is normally first (p. 213), though locations may raise over it.

In chapter three, “Strong and Weak Arguments,” we look in detail at topic and focus. In particular, adverbs and particles like *semper*, *numquam*, and *quoque* are usually associated with focus and with non-default word orders. Devine and Stephens begin the chapter with an analysis of “strong narrow focus” (p. 225), which is what our textbooks and composition handbooks generally mean by “emphasis.” Although a phrase with strong narrow focus may be first in the sentence, it can in fact appear almost anywhere. As a result, “in any given position, the presence of strong narrow focus is cued primarily by the prosody” (p. 232), not by the syntax. In other words, this syntactic analysis has given us a clue to the sound of Latin. We don’t know exactly how the focused phrase would have been spoken — louder? higher pitch? slower? — but we can be fairly sure that it must have been audibly distinct from the surrounding material.

The final section of chapter three considers pronouns. Although Latin does not have a set of enclitic forms for pronouns,<sup>2</sup> punctuation in inscriptions shows that pronouns are weak (phonologically dependent) when they are tails, but not when they are topic or focus material (p. 277). Weak pronouns apparently do not appear in initial position, but are not necessarily in second position either: Wackernagel’s law is not absolute for Latin pronouns (p. 282). In fact, Devine and Stephens argue that weak pronouns are generated in the base verb phrase, then are usually raised to a higher position (p. 298); this process is neither entirely syntactic nor entirely prosodic.

Next we move to nouns. Chapter four, “Arguments of Nominals,” considers the shape of the noun phrase. The key observation here is that where modifiers and other adjuncts come relative to their head nouns depends on the noun itself: “word order in noun phrases . . . isn’t random: it varies according to lexical item.” (p. 314) For example, when *filius* “son” is modified by a genitive, “so-and-so’s son,” the genitive almost invariably comes before the head noun (p. 352). But when *uxor* “wife” is similarly modified, the genitive comes first about 57% of the time, after the noun about 43% — Cicero writes both *M. Luculli uxorem* and *uxor Mendi* (p. 355). In fact, there is a

<sup>2</sup>For example, in Greek ἐμοί and μοί are both dative singular, “to/for me.” The first is a full word and the second is an enclitic, unstressed form. In Sanskrit, similarly, *mahyam* is the full form of the dative singular and *me* the enclitic variant.

perfect minimal pair with *socer* “father-in-law,” *socerum tuae filiae* in Fam. 3.10.10, *filiae tuae socerum* in Fam. 3.4.2 (p. 360).<sup>3</sup> So there is no obvious rule that, say, genitives denoting inalienable possession always come before their nouns. Devine and Stephens argue that here, too, it is the pragmatics that determines whether a modifier comes before or after its head. Normally, though, the complement comes after and is either a focus or a tail (p. 381). Several theories may explain why this happens (p. 380). After considering them in turn, Devine and Stephens conclude “We will leave it to you to choose the theory you like best; or maybe you can think of a better one. Perhaps they each have something to contribute.” (p. 391) While on one level, this is not entirely satisfying, it is honest and it reflects the current state of work in syntax: many approaches, each useful, none definitive.

The fifth chapter, “Modifiers,” looks at several particular classes of adjectives and what happens when several adjectives modify the same noun. The basic rule is that adjectives come after their nouns, but this depends strongly on what kind of adjective and also on period of writing and on the author’s own style (p. 403). For example, there is a clear change in the two centuries between Cato the Elder and Columella. These authors are useful for comparison because they both wrote prose treatises on farming, so the subject matter and even the vocabulary are similar. Cato puts adjectives of material (such as *ferreus*, “iron”) after their nouns, while Columella can have them either after or before (p. 405). Sometimes the adjective comes before the noun because it is focused, for example contrasting two different materials, but more often there is no obvious focus. Devine and Stephens suggest that for Columella the adjective contains the information and the noun is tail material, so the adjective raises over it (p. 409). It is not clear why this happens, but we can see a transition between the two structures in Cicero’s use of similar adjectives (pp. 411–412). Other kinds of adjectives, such as those derived from names of places or people, or those denoting evaluation, have their own specific rules.

When there is more than one adjective, they are arranged in a hierarchical order, which is largely consistent across languages (p. 476). As a rule, the adjectives closest to the noun are the most specific and objective, while those further away are more relative or more subjective. The general order is

quality > size > shape > color > provenance

where quality descriptors, often relative or subjective, are furthest away and provenance words are closest (p. 476). For example, in English we

<sup>3</sup>Both are letters from Cicero to Appius Claudius Pulcher, referring to Pompey (Gn. Pompeius Magnus), whose son was married to one of Claudius’s daughters.

might say “a lovely Persian carpet” (quality, provenance, noun) or “a little black cat” (size, color, noun). But in Latin it’s possible to have adjectives on both sides of the noun; this is apt to happen when the pre-modifier has focus (p. 480).

Finally, chapter six, “Hyperbaton,” explores how and why phrases can be pulled apart. After acknowledging that hyperbaton is “perhaps the most distinctively alien feature of Latin word order” (p. 524), certainly for the learner, Devine and Stephens say,

The natural inclination of the English speaker is to put Humpty Dumpty together again by reconstituting a continuous noun phrase . . . out of the disiecta membra of hyperbaton. But we shall argue that this inclination should be resisted as another manifestation of the bad old habit of ignoring word order when reading Latin. It makes better sense to interpret the discontinuous elements of hyperbaton in the positions into which the syntax has put them on the basis of their pragmatic values. (p. 524)

These sentences could profitably be posted over the door of every Latin classroom in the English-speaking world. Latin word order is different from English even in straightforward sentences, and is not as consistent or as predictable as English order, but the variation is not random: it is motivated by the way the sentence fits into the larger discourse context. Students whose primary contact with the Latin language is isolated sentences set for translation into English do not get to see how this variation works, because without context there is no pragmatics.

There is no general conclusion. In part the main ideas have already been sketched in the introduction, and in part each chapter stands alone. The book has an index nominum and an index rerum, but no index locorum, which would have been quite useful — I could easily imagine wanting to look up all the examples from a text as I prepare to teach it. Footnotes appear at the end of each chapter. The twenty-page bibliography includes much important work on Latin and on syntax.

It is useful to consider the relevance of a book on Latin *prose* syntax for readers of *Versification*. Devine and Stephens give a few hints in the final chapter, where most of their examples from verse texts turn up. In the discussion of hyperbaton in prepositional phrases, for example, they note that raising of the noun instead of the modifier (*numine sub dominae*, “under the deity of my mistress,” Ovid *Metamorphoses* 15.546) is more common in verse than in prose, though prose authors could write *dominae sub numine* with the modifier raised out of the prepositional phrase (p. 569). Hyperbaton of descriptive adjectives is also more common in verse (p. 606). For Cicero and Caesar, a modifier coming before its noun is focused; for Livy,

however, it need not be. Livy's syntax here agrees with Ovid rather than with Cicero, retaining a "more conservative typology" (p. 606) for adjective position.

It would be useful to consider other ways in which verse word order differs from that of prose. The few verse examples (about two dozen) are taken mostly from Ovid, Vergil, Tibullus, and Horace, with a few from Plautus, Lucretius, and one line from Terence. Plautus is quoted alongside Caesar (pp. 149, 205), in cases where his word order is the ordinary or expected one. Is this typical of Plautus, or does he use the same "poetic" variations, or in the same proportions, as Ovid? Is there more difference between genres, between individual authors, or between time periods? What about specific meters: is there a difference between Ovid's word order in hexameter and in elegiacs? Or in Catullus's various meters? The framework that Devine and Stephens set out could be used to explore these and other questions.

Similarly, although Devine and Stephens appeal to prosody to explain some deviations from normal word order, they do not consider prose rhythm as a motivation. Are there instances in which Cicero (for example) chooses a non-default word order to produce a desirable clausula? If so, is there also a pragmatic explanation for this arrangement, or has Cicero chosen to favor sound over syntax?

Aside from verse, the other major area for future work is non-classical Latin. Exactly how much does medieval word order differ? What about Humanist Latin: were the humanists sufficiently fluent in Latin that they intuitively picked up the tricks of classical word order? Much of what Devine and Stephens have documented in this book is highly subtle: even fairly experienced readers of Latin may not have realized that possessives behave differently with *filius* and *uxor*, for example. How experienced does a reader have to be to recognize this kind of variation?

It is a mark of the value of *Latin Word Order* that it raises such fundamental questions.