

# A Comparative Analysis of Word Order in Simple Sentences: Berber Tarifit and Moroccan Arabic

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how words are arranged in Berber Tarifit and Moroccan Arabic. It gives details about the social and language background of both languages. By looking at examples, the study shows that Berber has three main ways to arrange words: subject-verb-object (SVO), verb-subject-object (VSO), and object-verb-subject (OVS). Most of the time, Berber uses SVO and VSO, which are flexible, while OVS is rare and only used in certain cases. Other word orders are either very rare or not allowed. The research also explains how one-single-word sentences in Berber are structured. For Moroccan Arabic, the study finds that this language mainly uses two ways to arrange words: VSO, which is common in many situations, and SVO, which is used only in specific situations. Unlike Berber, Moroccan Arabic only uses these two structures. The article highlights the similarities and differences in how flexible the word order is in both languages.

**Keywords-** Word order, Berber Tarifit, Moroccan Arabic, SVO, Language.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to explore the word order in Berber and Moroccan Arabic. The paper starts by providing a general sociolinguistic background about the two languages. Subsequently, it presents several contextualized examples and tests them to identify which of the six-word order possibilities Berber allows. Generally speaking, the word orders that Berber allows are SVO, VSO, and OVS. However, as the corpus shows, the most frequent word orders of sentences in Berber are SVO and VOS. These two-word orders can be used in almost all conversation contexts, making sense semantically and syntactically. However, although VSO sentences are not restricted to a particular context and are common in the Berber language structure, they are less common than the SVO, the common alternative for VSO. OVS order is also possible but is much less frequent than SVO and VSO. It is possible only under certain conditions. Other word order possibilities are either very limited to specific contexts and conditions or

are not possible at all. The paper concerns itself also with the Berber sentences which seem to be formed by one word. Furthermore, this study examines the word order possibilities in Moroccan Arabic. As the paper will illustrate, Moroccan Arabic, Like Berber Tarifit, is an SVO and VSO language; however, unlike Berber, which allows the possibility of some other sequences of word order, Moroccan Arabic is strictly restricted to VSO and SVO. More precisely, the paper will demonstrate that Moroccan Arabic has two common word orders: an unmarked VSO word order used in any context, and a marked SVO used only under specific discourse conditions.

## II. SOCIOLINGUISTIC BACKGROUND OF MOROCCAN ARABIC AND BERBER

### 2.1. Berber

Berber Tarifit, which is the focus of this study, is spoken in the North of Morocco, namely in the

provinces of Al Heima and Nador. It is also known as Riffian or locally as Tamazight. Berber languages are spoken mainly in North Africa; more specifically in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. They are also spoken in Mauritania, and some of the Sub-Saharan countries like Mali, Niger, and Chad (Jilali, 1977). Some areas where Berber is used are discontinuous because they are surrounded by Arab-Speaking populations. However, in some other areas, Berber-speaking people constitute a single population center, which can be in certain places of great size.

Berber belongs to the Afro-Asiatic language family and was a spoken language without any written form. It is reported that Berber had a written manuscript called "Tifinagh". The latter has been revived recently and it is the same alphabet, Tifinagh, that is being used at schools to teach Berber. Although public schooling has had an effect on Berber regression (Jilali, 1977), Berber has not disappeared because its speakers remain faithful to it by using it in their daily communication. It is a language of home, friends, and, most importantly, solidarity. This is a tangible support of the linguists' claim that a language dies only when its last speaker dies. In Morocco, there are three major languages or dialects. Tamazight is used in the Middle Atlas Mountains and the Eastern half of the high Atlas Mountains. Tashelhit is spoken by the High Atlas and the Anti-Atlas Mountains in southern Morocco. Tarifit is the third main Berber dialect in Morocco. It is spoken in the Rif Mountains in the North of Morocco, especially in Al Hoceima and Nador. In Algeria, there exist also three main dialects of Berber. These dialects are: Kabyle, spoken in Algiers and Bougie, Shawia, used by the population of Awras Mountains, and Tuareg, used in the far south of Algeria. Tuareg is also spoken in Mali and Niger. However, it is in Morocco that Berber is widely spoken as a native language by a great part of the population of the country.

According to Jilali (1977), there is an important resemblance between all Berber varieties, except for Tuareg, on the level of syntax, lexicon, phonology, and morphology. The Berber dialects used in Morocco are essentially the same in the sense that they share many common properties. The variations that can be noticed are chiefly lexical and phonological. The further we go from one geographical area to another, the more phonological variations we recognize. This can, sometimes, cause communication breakdowns and misunderstandings between speakers of different geographical zones. For instance, a speaker of Berber Tarifit, which is spoken in the north of the country, can hardly understand a Berber speaker from the south. However, although there are some variations in the level of phonology, the patterns of syntax and morphology are relatively similar. In recent years, these three dialects have been standardized under the name of Tamazight, which is being taught at public schools nowadays.

## 2.2. Moroccan Arabic

Moroccan Arabic is the language that is used in everyday conversation by the Arab-speaking population in Morocco. Like Berber Tarifit, Moroccan Arabic also consists of different varieties. However, the difference between these varieties is less important as compared to the difference between Berber dialects in the sense that people of different dialects of Moroccan Arabic can understand each other fairly well. Any dialect used will serve as an adequate means of communication in the entire country.

A linguist who might concern himself or herself with the phonology of Moroccan Arabic will divide it into at least five main varieties: The tangier dialect spoken in the upper northern part of the country, Oujda dialect in the North East on the Borders with Algeria, which is not very different from Algerian Arabic, Fes dialect spoken in the region of Fes, Casablanca dialect spoken in the north East and central areas of Morocco, and Marrakech spoken in the south of the country. One might find further distinctions, depending on how detailed the observations need to be. This phonological variation occurs in many languages of the world. Quirk et al. (1972), for instance, in their description of English, point out that it is pointless to ask how many dialects of English there are because there are a great many and their number will depend on how detailed one wishes to be. However, in any case, all these forms of Moroccan Arabic are mutually intelligible because of social interactions, mass media, and many other new aspects of globalization.

Linguistically speaking, Moroccan Arabic is not an autonomous language; it historically derives from Classical Arabic. Therefore, Moroccan Arabic stands in a diglossic position with respect to Classical Arabic. Within the society, it functions as low or informal since it is not codified or standardized, while Classical Arabic is considered more formal because it is the language of education, literature, and, more importantly, the official language of the state.

Like all the Arab countries Colloquial in Morocco or Moroccan Arabic is in many respects radically different from Standard or Classical Arabic. Hence, it is necessary to describe it separately since the Classical Arabic syntactic principles and rules cannot be applied to the Moroccan Arabic spoken form. However, although the two forms of Arabic are different languages in certain respects, it is not, by any means, true to claim that they are separate languages. Rather, they have a great impact on each other. With the development of public schooling and education, Classical Arabic tends to have more influence on the colloquial form. Under modern conditions of mass media, it is common to notice that the spoken variety also generates a considerable impact on Classical Arabic, especially at the level of phonology and lexis. This influence has become more noticeable in the last decades because

today Moroccan Arabic has started to gain its place in the academic spheres such as news channels and some formal debates. However, it should be noted that this fact results in the disappearance of some local and rustic styles in favor of something more easily comprehensible and cosmopolitan. This mutual influence between Moroccan Arabic and Classical Arabic is shown up in the speech of most educated people in the sense that they cannot stick to the use of one of these languages in their discourse; they unconsciously switch the code to find more suggestive expressions they may find in one of these languages but not in the other one. Hence, it can be claimed that this association is likely to grow as long as there is an increase in literacy, education, and a wide range of mass communication.

### III. BERBER AND MOROCCAN ARABIC WORD ORDER

#### 3.1. Berber Word Order

Broadly speaking, Berber sentences are not restricted to only one-word order; rather, they can exhibit most of the possible word orders. So, let us consider the following examples and see the possible word orders in Berber:

**VSO:**

1. *I-asha* John tabanand  
He ate John banana  
John ate the banana

**SVO:**

2. John *i-asha* tabanand  
John, he ate banana  
John ate the banana

**OVS:**

3. Tabanand *i-asha-t* John  
Banana, he ate it John  
John ate the banana

**VOS:**

4. *i-asha* tabanand John  
He ate banana John  
John ate the banana

**SOV:**

5. John tabanan *i-sha*  
John banana he ate  
John ate the banana

**OSV:**

6. Tabanad John *a t i-sha -n*  
Banana John, it ate  
The banana, it is John who ate it

From the examples listed above, we can notice that the basic word order in Berber is SVO. SVO sentences can be used freely in all stages of conversations in the sense that they are not restricted to any particular context. Furthermore, there are many instances where Berber sentences can accept only SVO or its alternative VSO. However, there are no sentences that can take the order of any of the mentioned word

order cases without being SVO. When the sentence is intransitive, the SV is the most expected word order. e.g. John *i-mmuth* [John died].

However, it is interesting to note that VSO is the nearest alternative order to SVO. The great majority of sentences in Berber can be both SVO and VOS. These two-word orders can be used in almost all contexts of conversations, where they make sense both semantically and syntactically. However, although VSO sentences are not restricted to a particular context and are common in the Berber language structure, they are less common than their SVO counterparts. More importantly, the occurrence of the subject in the sentence's initial position, which is the position of emphasis in Berber, makes SVO word order more prominent.

As to OVS sentences, they seem to be marked on both the formal and the semantic levels. On the formal level, OVS sentences are characterized by the obligatory occurrence of the direct object clitic *t* on the verb (cf. 3). On the semantic level, OVS sentences make the direct object prominent by shifting it to the initial position of the sentence. However, it should be noted that OVS sentences are much less usual and much more marked than SVO and VSO. In fact, OVS sentences in Berber need special contexts in which the direct object is the focus. Also, they are uttered with a special intonation. If we consider example 3 given above, we find that the focus is put on the banana and the sentence in the example serves as an answer to questions like: where is the banana? Or who ate the banana? The non-speakers of Berber might think that the English counterpart of the sentence in example 3 is “the banana was eaten by John”, but that is not the case, especially on the syntactic level. In fact, OVS sentences can hardly ever initiate a conversation, and there are many constructions in which OVS order is not possible:

Mansra tabanand *I-sha- t* John?  
When banana he ate it John  
When the banana John ate?

OVS sentences can have only OV in certain contexts:

Tabanand *I-sha -t*  
Banana he ate it  
The banana, he ate it

Such kinds of sentences are uttered in a special context and with a special intonation. Strictly speaking, they are not subjectless. The subject is left out since both the interlocutors know who did the action. Further, the prefix *i-* stands for the third person singular. Note that, unlike VS and SV sentences, OV sentences occur only with transitive verbs even though part of the definition of transitive verbs is that they require a direct object. Note also that the passive of the sentence can have a VO order since the agent is not present.

VOS sentences are rather marginal. They depend heavily on a special intonation and context for their acceptability. The most likely context in which such kind of sentences can occur is when the speaker does not wish the subject to do the action or whatever is expressed by the verb. Like OVS, VOS order does not make sense in many constructions, especially in interrogative structures:

*Marmi I-sha* tabanad John?  
When he ate banana John  
When ate John the banana?

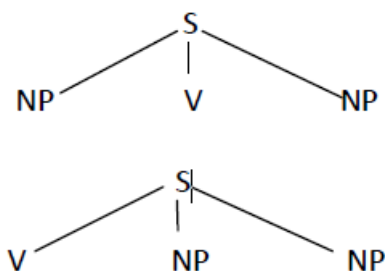
VOS sentences have VO counterparts with which, surprisingly, the passive form is possible. SOV and OSV are two severely restricted types of word order in Berber. They can hardly occur in conversation except in some very rare contexts and they are confusing for non-native speakers of Berber. Like OVS and VOS, SOV and OSV are not accepted at all in negative structures.

\**Marmi tabanand John a I-sha*?  
When banana John he ate  
When was it the banana that John ate?

\**Marmi John tabanand a I-asha*  
When John banana he ate  
When was it the banana that John ate?

Unlike other cases, the sequences SO and OS are absolutely ungrammatical and therefore not acceptable since they do not contain a verb which is the essential part of the sentence in Berber, like most of the languages in the world.

Therefore, considering the above analysis concerning the various possibilities of word order in Berber, we can deduce that Berber is a fairly strong SVO and VOS language, whereas other sequences of word order are only under certain conditions and depend on very limited contexts. Thus, the following types of syntactic trees are the most appropriate for Berber:



OVS is also possible in certain cases but is the least frequent order. Further, in all cases where OVS is acceptable SVO and VSO are also very likely to occur. Hence, there is strong evidence that SVO and VSO

orders in Berber are basic and more convenient than any other word order. Note that there are no cases in which SVO is possible but VSO is not acceptable and vice versa; however, there might be some cases where SVO is preferable to VOS.

**3.2. One-word Sentence in Berber**

Berber is a language in which a verbal constituent can on its own make a simple sentence, conveying a complete thought. In the following example, for instance, the verb “to eat” in Berber stands on its own as a complete sentence.

*i-sha*  
“He ate”

Note that the verb in this sentence is marked for person, number, and gender through the element *i-*. In other words, the element *-i* stands for the third singular masculine (he). However, according to Ann de Schryver (1987), whose study of the position of the subject in Rif Berber confirms my understanding of it, the element *-i* in Berber is totally different from the English pronoun ‘he’ in the sense that it is not a separate constituent and, more importantly, it differs from the Berber independent Pronoun ‘*ntta*’, which stands for the 3rd person singular masculine, which is a separate constituent. Further, its position is fixed. That is, the third person singular masculine is always shown on the verb with the prefix *i-*. The same holds for all other pronouns, but the prefix *i-* will be replaced by other prefixes because the verb in Berber inflects so often for person, number, and gender. For example: *i-sha*, *th-sha*, *n-sha*, and *a-shi-n* means [he ate, she ate, we ate, they ate] respectively. Note that certain pronouns require both a prefix and a suffix, just as the example of the 3rd person plural indicates. Jan De Schryver considers such elements as agreement markers to unexpressed lexical subjects. Hence, by this token, the subject itself is not expressed in sentences such as the example shown above. Yet, the question of whether the elements in question are agreement markers of the unexpressed subject or they themselves stand as the subject-slot requires further research because Berber has been poorly studied by linguists. However, whichever statement will be considered true, the important thing in this paper is that these elements cannot be a basis for determining word order, as “the position of one and the same person can never change” (Jan de Schutter (1987, P.17).

**3.3. Moroccan Arabic Word Order**

Like Berber, Moroccan Arabic is an SVO and VSO language; however, unlike Berber, which allows the possibility of some other sequences of word order, Moroccan Arabic is strictly restricted to VSO and SVO. That is, Moroccan Arabic has two common word orders: an unmarked VSO word order used in any context, and a marked SVO used only under specific discourse conditions. For more illustration, let us consider the following examples:

**VSO 1**

*Kla John l-banana*  
Ate John the banana  
John ate the banana

**SVO 2**

*John kla l-banana*  
John ate the banana

Both the sentences in VSO and SVO seem to be grammatically accepted and convey the same meaning without any confusion or misunderstanding. The only difference that might be noted is that in the first sequence, VSO, the focus seems to be on the object: “what did John eat?”; whereas in SVO the attention is drawn more to the Subject: who ate the banana? Therefore, as mentioned above, these two-word orders seem the only ones that Moroccan Arabic can undergo. I have tried, in my field analysis, to test all the possible world orders but most of the sentences seem either grammatically unaccepted or meaningless at all, except OVS. The latter seems to occur in Moroccan Arabic but is, just like its counterpart in Berber, strictly limited to some conditional contexts. Further, the OVS sentences should contain an object pronoun or a clitic suffixed to the main verb of the sentence. In the following sentence, for instance, the object pronoun *ha* (it) is obligatory for the sentence to be meaningful.

*L-banana kla-ha John*  
The banana ate it  
John John ate the banana

This order, OVS, in Moroccan Arabic as well as in Berber is produced for the sake of emphasis, by shifting the post-verbal elements to the head of the sentence. That is to say, in OVS sentences, both in Berber and Moroccan Arabic, the initial position of the sentence may be occupied by the emphatic element to draw attention to it.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that VSO is the basic and more common word order in Moroccan Arabic. This is probably due to the influence of standard Arabic which is strictly a VSO language. VSO sentences, for example, can be produced at any stage of conversation where SVO ones occur only at the beginning of the conversation, shifting the subject to the initial position, which is the focus position. That is to say, SVO sentences are convenient only when the subject needs to be highlighted for emphasis or focus. In other words, in SVO the head noun phrase, the subject serves to draw attention to the discourse. Therefore, SVO sentences may not occur at the beginning of the conversation unless the speaker wants to draw specific attention to the subject.

Najat Benchiba Savenius (2011), who has carried out a structural analysis of Moroccan Arabic and English intra-code switching, states that both VSO and

SVO word orders are possible in Moroccan Arabic without restriction on the use of one or the other. She provides the following examples:

1. *Jaw a nas walla ma zel?*  
Come 3PL DEF people or NEG yet?  
Have the people come or not yet?

2. *A nas jaw walla ma zel?*  
DEF people come 3PL or NEG yet?  
Have the people come or not yet?  
(B. Savenius, 2011, P.117)

The first sentence is VS(O) and the second sentence is SV (O). The verbs in these sentences are intransitive but the word orders of both sentences are expected to be VSO and SVO respectively. What I find out from these two examples that B. Savenius cites, as well as from other examples I studied in field analysis, is that the questions in Moroccan Arabic questions have the same order as statements.

Also, according to B. Avenius, in her corpus of Moroccan Arabic and Dutch code-switching, Nortier implies that the word order in Moroccan Arabic remains the same even in instances of code-switching:

SVO ordering:

1. *Ana ma kanshrab –sh l birra*  
I NEG1 drink 1SG NEG2 beer  
“I don't drink beer”  
(B. Savenius, 2011, P. 117)

V (S)O ordering:

2. *Waqau mashakil*  
Happen PL problem M PL ,,  
Problems happened”  
(B. Savenius 2011, P. 117)

Hence, according to B. Savenius and my own data analysis, Moroccan Arabic is strictly a VSO and SVO language.

**3.4. Moroccan Arabic and English Word Order**

As we have seen in the above analysis, Moroccan Arabic is both a VSO and SVO language but, in most cases, it tends to be a VSO. However, whether it is VSO or SVO and English is strictly SVO has no bearing on the individual level. Hence, it will be more interesting to consider the word ordering in these two languages, Moroccan Arabic and English, when combined in code-switching. In her study of the Syntax of English and Moroccan Arabic code-switching, Najat Benchiba provides the following examples:

1. *Bda y-gull -i something but I didn't catch gaa*  
Start telling 3SG me something but I didn't catch it all.  
“ He started telling me something but I didn't catch it all”

2. I kept telling him *bsah ma bgha –sh y-listen*  
I keep telling him but NEG1 want NEG2 listen 3SG  
“I kept telling him but he did not want to listen”
3. “Are we going to get some *houli-s* for laid *wlla khasna n-wait-iw*”  
“Are we going to get some sheep PL for Eid or we have to wait 3PL”  
“Are we going to get some sheep for Eid or do we have to wait” (2011, P.118)

The combinations seem quite striking. In the first sentence, we have Moroccan Arabic word order plus English word order Moroccan Arabic. In the second example, we have English word order plus Moroccan Arabic word order. The third example contains English plus Moroccan Arabic and it is, according to, B. Savenius (2011), a good example of the language spoken by the third generation in England. The speaker adds the English plural marker “s” to the singular noun *houli* (sheep) to mark plurality. Also, the verb “wait” is sandwiched between Moroccan Arabic aspectual marker and suffix, while the English root is kept. What is interesting in these examples is not a transparent view of code-switching mechanisms that are employed by bilingual speakers, but is the fact that they give us a better concept of Moroccan Arabic syntax which is essential in order to fully grasp the strategies that bilinguals use to merge two or more syntaxes in normal discourse. These examples also prove that the syntax of Moroccan Arabic is not complex in the sense that it is successfully combined with English.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In short, the most common word orders in both Moroccan Arabic and Berber are VSO and SVO. This is

probably due to the fact that the two languages are spoken in the same environmental and cultural context. Put differently, most Moroccan people, Berbers and Arabs alike, share the same values, traditions, religion, culture, and many other aspects of life. Moreover, most Berbers are bilingual; they speak both Berber and Moroccan Arabic. However, Moroccan Arabic tends to accept VSO sequence more than SVO, while in Berber the opposite is true. Furthermore, whereas Berber seems to allow some other possibilities of word order, Moroccan Arabic is strictly VSO and SVO.

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