

Grammar Guru 2

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Look at these favourite sentences of linguists:

- a) The professor killed the mosquito.
- b) The mosquito killed the professor.

What a world of difference in meaning! Both sentences contain the same words but they are put in different order in each. In (a), the professor, in his annoyance, claps his hands and the poor mosquito, caught unawares, dies instantaneously. In (b), on the other hand, the poor professor is bitten by the villain anopheles mosquito, contracts malaria and meets his tragic end.

Word order is very important in English. We often forget this because in Indian languages you need not worry about the order of words in a sentence. Whether you say it in the active voice or the passive voice, the meaning remains the same. Our languages are inflectional, but English is not.

Basically, Tamil is an SOV language, whereas English is an SVO language. In English, we say *Shakespeare wrote Hamlet* [subject-verb-object]. The same sentence, written in Tamil, when literally translated into English, will read as *Shakespeare Hamlet wrote* [subject-object-verb].

However, there are some exceptions to bug us. In the following sentences the subject follows the verb.

- *Seldom have I seen such a beautiful sight.*

- *Nowhere in the world could you find a building as beautiful as the Taj Mahal.*
- *Never have I heard such nonsense!*

Well, can you formulate a rule for the exception? Yes, you are right – when adverbs like *hardly, seldom, never, nowhere, rarely, and scarcely* occur at the beginning of a sentence.

Is word order so very important? Don't people still understand me? Not necessarily, and not always. There are occasions when you may be totally misunderstood, or you will commit goofs and become a laughing stock! Or your ambiguity might irritate your listeners and cost you a fortune. Here are some famous goofs:

He was very fond of her. He thought of marrying her more than once.

How many times can one marry the same person? The appropriate word order should be:

He was very fond of her; more than once he thought of marrying her.

What is funny about this sentence?

A gentleman has a dog to sell, who wishes to go abroad.

The million-dollar question is: who wishes to go abroad – the gentleman or the dog?

The simple rule that we should remember is this:

All qualifying words, phrases and clauses, should be placed as near as possible to the words to which they refer.

Here are some funny sentences to tease you. Would you like to set them right? You'll find the answers elsewhere in this paper.

- a) *Rarely there has been such a gathering of celebrities.*
- b) *A nursemaid is wanted for a baby about twenty years old.*
- c) *It is proposed to construct a bath for males ninety nine feet long.*

[Editor's Note: This is part of a series of

articles contributed by the author and published earlier in The Times of India, Education Times from May 2008 to May 2013. We are thankful to the author to permit us to publish those articles in our journal.]

Answers

- a) *Rarely has there been such a gathering of celebrities.*
- b) *A nursemaid, about twenty years old, is wanted for a baby.*
- c) *It is proposed to construct a bath, ninety-nine feet long, for males.*

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