

## First Things First: The pragmatics of “natural order”

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In the *Categories* (14a26-b23), Aristotle identifies a set of natural ordering principles by which one thing may be prior (*πρότερον*) to another. In particular, A can be prior to B either “with respect to temporal order” or “with respect to what is better and more valued”. But when and how do these ordering principles apply to linguistic sequences, in particular when they come into conflict with each other? What determines the priority between these principles of priority? And what makes “natural order” natural?

More recently, a variety of pragmatically motivated ordering principles have been advanced by a variety of linguists, including Behagel, Jakobson, Greenberg, Osgood, Levelt, Ross, and others. The explananda range across, *inter alia*,

- the order of clauses [S1 and S2]
- the order of conjoined nominals [DP1 and/or DP2; N1 and/or N2]
- the order of constituents within a clause (SOV, SVO, VSO, OSV,...)
- the order of internal arguments, e.g. verb DP1 [prep DP2] vs. verb DP2 [prep DP1]

Grice’s “Be orderly” maxim accounts for the temporal asymmetry of eventive clausal conjunctions (I took off my trousers and went to bed vs. I went to bed and took off my trousers) through iconicity: “the most orderly manner for a narration of events is an order that corresponds to the order in which they took place” (Grice 1981: 186). As it happens, Grice’s analysis of such conjunctions was a bimillennial echo of Dionysius of Halicarnassus’s (1st c. BCE) “natural” but crucially context-defeasible principle stipulating that “events earlier in time are mentioned earlier in the order of words than those which occurred later.” For Quintilian (1st c. CE) too, *naturalis ordo* determines the discourse order of events as for Dionysius, while “better precedes worse” dictates the order of conjoined state predications, although this too is a soft constraint that be overridden in the standard manner of pragmatic or rhetorical rules.

In this presentation, I revisit several core principles of “natural order” and track the reflexes of—and competition between—these principles as manifested in both clausal and nominal conjunction (as in (1) and (2) respectively), in the rhetorical asymmetry of adversative *p* but *q* structures (as in (3)), in the antanaclastic twin existential *There’s X* and (then) *there’s X* (as in (4)), and in the ongoing shift in the argument structure assigned to the substitute *X* for *Y* construction (as in (5)).

(1)

- a. They got married and they had a baby.
- b. They had a baby and they got married.

(2)

- a. good or bad; he or she; men and women; Mr. and Mrs.
- b. Victoria and Albert; ladies and gentlemen; bride and groom

(3)

- a. He’s rich but he’s creepy. [*>* so steer clear of him!]
- b. He’s creepy but he’s rich. [*>* so give him a chance!]

(4)

- a. There are dinner jackets and dinner jackets; this is the latter. (*Casino Royale*)
- b. There are gaffes and then there are gaffes.

(5)

- a. Can I substitute salad for soup? [*NEW-for-OLD > OLD-for-NEW*]
- b. We’re often told to substitute saturated animal fats for healthier vegetable oils.