Is PJM SVO or SOV?

The aim of this paper is to analyze the underlying order of sentential constituents in Polish Sign Language (polski język migowy, hereafter PJM). Although the issue of sign language sentence structure has been present in the literature for more than 30 years now (cf., e.g., Fischer (1975), Friedman (1976)), no satisfactory account thereof has yet been proposed in the case of PJM. Since visual-spatial communication is not fully linear, the importance (or even presence) of basic word order has gone unnoticed in most early accounts of the linguistic properties of PJM. Although a thorough analysis has yet to be produced, it is obvious that PJM does have its own rules of ordering constituents, and that they are different from those found in spoken Polish.

As noted by Dryer (2011), of the six possible orders of sentential constituents, only three are commonly found: SOV (subject-object-verb, 41% of analyzed languages), SVO (subject-verb-object, 35.5%), and VSO (verb-subject-object, 6.9%). 75% of the world’s languages use SOV or SVO, the next most frequent type is characterized by the absence of a basic word order. Therefore, it is not surprising that SVO and SOV are also the most frequent basic word orders in sign languages. As Perniss, Pfau & Steinbach (2007) say, there is no sign language displaying a VSO order.

As for PJM, publications that attempt to address the above question are few and far between. The earliest known grammatical description of PJM (Hollak & Jagodziński (1879)) views SVO as the only available order. The very few recent analyses that do refer to word order facts often present contradictory generalizations, e.g. Tomaszewski (2007) supports the SVO option, while Tomaszewski & Rosik (2007) present SOV as the basic order.

We would like the present paper to fill the above-mentioned gap in our understanding of how the syntax of PJM works. In order to avoid subjective judgements and stipulations, we have based our analysis on solid empirical data, namely on the visual corpus of PJM that is currently being developed by our team. The corpus is composed of signed utterances collected from signers who either have Deaf parents or have used PJM since childhood. The informants are asked to react to certain visual stimuli, e.g. by describing a picture or discussing a video recording.

Our careful inspection of approximately 20 hours of random video material extracted from the PJM corpus has revealed a number of generalizations that seem to hold across signers. First of all, SV is definitely the only order attested when no object is present. As for structures with two arguments, the verb class (plain vs. non-plain/agreeing/spatial) tends to play a decisive role. Plain verbs favor SVO, whilst non-plain verbs often trigger SOV. The latter pattern is also found in sentences with classifier predicates. This observation corresponds to the cross-linguistic pattern described in Padden (1988), Kegl (2004), Milković et al. (2006), Hendriks (2008), and Kimmelman (2012), among others. Interestingly, the semantic feature of animacy seems to be an important factor too. When the object is inanimate, the SOV order is attested also in the case of plain verbs (see Morales-López et al. (2011) for similar facts in Spanish Sign Language). The above generalizations may be illustrated in the following way:

Attested orders:
- SV – example (1)
- SV_{plain} – examples (2-3)
- SO_{inanimate}V_{plain} – example (4)
- SOV\_non-plain – example (5)
- SOV\_classifier – example (6)

Unattested orders: *VS, *VSO, *VOS
REFERENCES:


Hollak, Józef & Jagodziński, Teofil (1879), Słownik mimiczny dla głuchoniemych i osób z nimi styczność mających, Warszawa.

Hendriks, Bernadet (2008), Jordanian Sign Language. Aspects of grammar from a cross-linguistic perspective, Utrecht: LOT.


EXAMPLES:

(1) MOUSE SLEEP
   'The mouse is sleeping.'
(2) INDEX-1 HAVE HUSBAND DEAF
   'I have a deaf husband.'
(3) INDEX-1 CHOOSE TOPIC
   'I will choose the topic.'
(4) INDEX-1 APPLE WANT
   'I want an apple.'
(5) GIRL INDEXa BOY INDEXb aHELP
   'The girl helped the boy.'
(6) TALL APPLE CLASSIFIER:SPHERELOCATION:HEAD
   'The tall one had an apple on his head.'