Ancient rhetoricians, grammarians and philosophers on natural word order

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1. Introduction

The idea that nature is to be taken as an example in life in general and in the artes in particular occurs frequently in antiquity. According to Democritus, human beings are “the pupils of the animals”. The Stoic philosophers felt that man must live in accordance with nature and also Epicurus held up nature as an example for humanity. The idea of nature is one of the most complex concepts we can talk about in language and this applies to the Greek word phusis and the Latin word natura as well. When we speak of nature or natural we can mean various things: to begin with nature may be used to refer to the character or essence of a thing. In that case what is unnatural is unusual. Sometimes nature coincides with the whole of the perceptible world. What is not perceptible is then supernatural, which in many cases means the divine world. Moreover, nature can refer to the world of plants and animals, as distinct from the human world. In that case we speak of the difference between nature and culture, or between natura and ars. All these ideas of what nature is can be called realistic; they are based on observations of the physical world. The complexity of the concept of nature, however, is increased by the assumption, as common now as in antiquity, that nature and the natural are always good. This idealistic view of nature is determined more by cultural values than by observation of reality. What one thinks of as good, one calls natural, and what one finds objectionable, one calls unnatural. The Roman philosopher Seneca, for example, held that plants were unnatural when they were placed on balconies or roofs; and the Dutch author J.J. Voskuil makes his main character in Het Bureau (The Institute) remark that it is unnatural for someone to behave as an intellectual.

We can also find the idea that nature is to be taken as a model in ancient views of language: ancient rhetoricians, grammarians and philosophers all mention a
theory of the existence of a natural word order. The wide dissemination of the concept of natural word order rather obscures the important differences which lurk behind the single term. It appears that the idea of a natural word order was used on three levels: practical, theoretical and philosophical. The rhetoricians derived principles for word order in the strict sense from nature. The grammarian Apollonius Dyscolus defended a theory of the hierarchy of the parts of speech, which appears to have more consequences for the grammatical discussion of these parts of speech than for practical sentence construction. Finally, the Stoic philosophers assumed that there was a certain hierarchy among the categories to which words refer.

2. Natural word order on a practical level: Rhetoricians

Let us begin at the practical level of the rhetoricians. The teacher of eloquence Dionysius of Halicarnassus resided in Rome from 30 to 8 B.C. His work *Peri suntheseòs onomatôn* (On the Juxtaposition of Words) deals with the question of how a speaker can compose pleasing and persuasive sentences. In the fifth chapter, Dionysius describes a sort of linguistic experiment, in which he investigates whether the effects sought in composition can be realised by a word order based on natural principles. His experimental material is Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Now Homer is, of course, a poet, but for Dionysius poetry and prose were not far apart. In antiquity, Homer was regarded as the great model for authors of poetry and prose. Moreover, the Homeric poems were very widely known and no one doubted their beauty. To be in harmony with nature was good; to be in harmony with Homer was even better.

In total, Dionysius names eight natural principles which he supposes must influence the order of words in a sentence. Three of them are illustrated by Homeric examples and provided with an explanation: (1) nouns precede verbs; (2) verbs precede adverbs; and (3) events earlier in time are mentioned earlier in the order of words than those which occurred later. Testing these principles against the Homeric epics, it becomes clear that the poet followed the natural word order in some cases, but in many others he did not. Thus for Dionysius the rules of nature turn out to be of little value, so that he does not examine the next five rules but flatly rejects them. These are as follows: according to nature, (4) substantives come before adjectives, (5) generic names precede proper names, (6) pronouns precede generic names, (7) underived verb forms come before derived verb forms and (8) indicatives before infinitives.

It is clear that Dionysius is using the word *nature* in different ways. Principle (3) refers to the *chronological* sequence in which events take place in reality. The other rules deal with grammatical categories. In most of those cases *natural* means no more
than (onto)logical. Thus a noun must precede a verb because a predicate presupposes a certain substance. Examples of this rule are Andra moi ennepe Mousa polutropon (Tell me, Muse, of the man of many wiles), the opening words of the Odyssey, and Mênin aeide thea (Sing the wrath, goddess), the opening of the Iliad. The noun andra (man) precedes the verb ennepe (tell), and the noun mênin (wrath) precedes the verb aeide (sing). But in other verses Homer’s word order appears to be contrary to the logic of nature. In Iliad II 484 (tell me now Muses, you who dwell on Olympus), the verb (tell) is placed before the noun (Muses). Dionysius therefore concludes that the principle (the logos) of nature is indeed credible but does not appear to be true. It is also striking that for him it does not seem to matter what syntactic functions the words fulfil in a sentence: andra and mênin are both direct objects of the predicates of which they are arguments. In all the cases mentioned, the verb precedes the vocative expression: Mousa follows the imperative ennepe, thea the imperative aeide and Muses follows the imperative verb form tell. The syntactic distinction between subject and object appears to have been rarely made in antiquity.

Some of the principles for which Dionysius does not provide an explanation are difficult to explain in the first instance. Why is it natural for generic names to precede proper names? And why must pronouns naturally precede generic names? We will show later that these rules may in fact be explained if we take into account their philosophical background. The beauty of Homer’s verses, however, does not appear to depend on the application of natural word order. Dionysius therefore decides to reject the theory.

Yet it reappears in the works of other rhetoricians. In Demetrius and pseudo-Longinus, two rhetoricians of the first century before or after Christ, however, natural word order has nothing to do with grammatical categories. Demetrius, the author of Peri hermêneias (On Style) discusses phusikê taxis (natural word order) in his chapters on the plain style. In this style, which is distinguished from the high style by its use of simple words and constructions, one must first name the topic and then provide further information. For Demetrius, natural word order appears to coincide with that of ordinary non-deviant speech. We find a similar view of natural order in pseudo-Longinus, the author of Peri hupsous (On the Sublime). He deals with natural word order in connection with the hyperbaton, or deviant word order. Hyperbaton is defined as an arrangement of words or ideas that deviates from their natural sequence. Just as it was for Demetrius, the natural is the normal and the non-deviant for Longinus. But it is striking that he also considers hyperbaton an imitation of nature. In real life, Longinus says, order is sometimes disturbed by whirlwinds; thus the deviant, unnatural order turns out to be in agreement with nature. This idea is not unimportant for someone like Longinus. In Peri hupsous he investigates the ways in which an orator can compose impressive and effective texts. According to him, one must use the classical writers as a model, especially the
writers in whose works one finds expressions of the *sublime*. These writers are people like Demosthenes and Thucydides, who Longinus maintains often formulate their thoughts in sentences with a deviant word order, which thus appears to be more interesting for Longinus than the normal order. This causes him to state that the *hyperbaton* is in fact in agreement with nature; what is good must, of course, also be natural. It is not for nothing that Longinus says that *art is only perfect if one takes it for nature*.

Although there are great differences between the rhetoricians we have mentioned, they agree that the natural order of words is not the only correct one. Though Dionysius of Halicarnassus feels that a natural word order exists, he rejects the idea that it is the yardstick for elegant discourse. Demetrius and Longinus give natural order a place in their rhetorical manuals, but they regard it as part of the plain style. For them, the high style, with its deviant word order and stylistic figures, is ultimately more interesting.

### 3. Natural word order on a theoretical level: Apollonius Dyscolus

Leaving the practical rhetorical level, we turn to the theoretical grammatical level. Natural order also played a part in the work of Apollonius Dyscolus, a grammarian who lived in Alexandria in the second century AD, and who was one of the few ancient writers to pay attention to syntax. It was his opinion that the whole of language was governed by rational order. At the beginning of his main work, the *Syntax*, he discusses the hierarchy of the *parts of speech*. In total Apollonius distinguished eight, which more or less agree with our terms noun, verb, participle, article, pronoun, adjective, adverb and conjunction. The sequence of these parts of speech, according to Apollonius, was governed not by chance but by a logical order. It is important to be aware that the order of the parts of speech defended by Apollonius is not the same as the order of words in a real sentence; rather, it is the order in which the parts of speech are to be treated in a grammar. Yet Apollonius’ logical reasoning largely agrees with that of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, for whom the natural order of words did indeed have consequences for practical sentence construction. The noun and the verb take the first and second places in the hierarchy of parts of speech, for without them, according to Apollonius, a sentence is incomplete. The noun precedes the verb since to perform or suffer an action is peculiar to a body; thus an action presupposes a body, so that a verb presupposes a noun. The natural order of the other parts of speech is determined by two considerations: on the one hand, the chronological sequence in which the parts are invented, and on the other hand, the combinations which the parts of speech can form with one another in an ordinary sentence.
We have now seen how the concept of the natural order was applied on two different levels by rhetoricians and grammarians. Rhetoricians assumed that a natural order existed at the level of ordinary speech. In the work of Apollonius Dyscolus the natural order of the parts of speech is approached on the theoretical level. It should be noted that all authors mentioned, in their treatment of natural order, make use of philosophical and probably Stoic terminology. This suggests that their theories are partly derived from philosophical sources.

4. Natural word order on a philosophical level: Stoic grammar

Stoic grammar never existed as a separate discipline. The grammatical observations of the Stoa formed part of their logic, that part of philosophy concentrating on everything that has to do with the logos, a term which can be translated, inter alia, as word and as reasoning. In general, the Stoics distinguished five parts of speech in their logic: proper name (onoma), generic name (proségoria), verb (rhêma), pronoun (arthron) and conjunction (sundesmos). No texts survive in which the order of these parts is discussed. There are, however, sources which show that the Stoics assumed that a certain order existed among the referents of the parts of speech. Like Aristotle, the Stoics knew a doctrine of so-called categories. The four (onto)logical categories are headings which make it possible to analyse and describe the entities encountered in reality. The first category is substrate or substance (hupokeimenon or ousia): by putting something in this category one indicates that it exists as an entity: it is material. The second category is quality (poion): this is divided into two subtypes, the generic and the particular. The generic quality makes a man a man while the particular quality makes him the individual man he is, e.g. Socrates. The third category is the state or disposition in which something exists (pôs echon). This category makes it possible to say that an entity is somewhere at a certain moment, with a certain size, and so on. The fourth category is the relative disposition in which something exists (pros ti pôs echon): this includes the characteristics which an object possesses in relation to something else, for example left and right.

It has already been pointed out that there may be a link between the Stoic categories and their theory of the parts of speech.¹¹ For us it is important that the order of the categories can explain a number of elements in the theories of natural order held by the rhetoricians and grammarians we have just discussed. For the natural word order of the parts of speech largely coincides with the order of the categories, which according to the Stoa was fixed.¹² category two can only be understood in relation to category one, and category three only in relation to category two. Finally, category four follows logically from category three.

How are these categories related to the parts of speech? The clearest agreement
is that between the second category (poion, generic and particular quality), and the parts of speech proper name (onoma) and generic name (proségoria). For the Stoic Diogenes of Babylon the generic name refers to a common quality, e.g. to man or to horse, and the proper name to an individual quality, e.g. to Diogenes or Socrates. We can see a similar relationship between the third category (pós echon, disposition) and the verb (rhêma). A rhêma can be used to indicate a predicate. The rhêma says something about the disposition (pós echon) an entity finds itself in. Thus the second category is referred to by the noun and the third by the verb. The first category (hupokeimenon or ousia, substrate or substance) indicates that something or someone exists as a material entity. The part of speech that has the same function in language is the demonstrative pronoun, which belongs to the arthron (pronoun, article). According to the Stoics, only by demonstrating or showing (deixis) can one make it clear that something exists; that, in other words, it is an ousia (a being). We find this theory in the Syntaxis of Apollonius Dyscolus as well: he also states that the demonstrative pronoun can express the ousia (being) of something. Finally, the fourth category, the relative disposition, can perhaps be connected with the conjunction (sundesmos) or with the transitive verbs, which require an extra complement in addition to the subject.

The Stoic categories, in my opinion, explain many elements of the theories of natural word order of Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Apollonius Dyscolus. Dionysius argued for the order of noun and verb from the view that a predicate presupposed a substance, while Apollonius believed that an action presupposed a body. These explanations now appear to coincide with the Stoic view that the state of a quality (category three) presupposes a quality (category two). The Stoic categories also help us to explain the natural principles that Dionysius of Halicarnassus himself left unexplained. Thus the order of generic and proper names can be linked to the order of the generic and particular qualities, and that order is described in a Stoic text as indispensable: Socrates is first a man, and only then is he Socrates. Another principle which in the first instance appeared hard to explain is concerned with Dionysius’ remark that a pronoun by nature precedes a generic name. This rule, too, can be understood in the light of the Stoic categories: the demonstrative pronoun expresses the ousia, and places an entity as it were in the first category; the thing indicated is qualified as something that has (material) existence. The generic name in turn agrees with the (common) quality of an entity: this only has meaning on the grounds of the validity of the first category, for the existence of a thing must precede its quality. For this reason, the demonstrative pronoun must precede the generic name in word order. Apart from the natural principles mentioned, one may also perhaps relate the order of substantives and adjectives to the Stoic doctrine of categories.
5. Conclusion

The theory of natural word order discussed by rhetoricians and grammarians appears to go back in part to Stoic philosophy. This in turn makes it clear that ancient grammar cannot be seen in isolation from philosophy. The logical thought processes of the Stoa were applied by the rhetorician Dionysius to the composition of real sentences, and by the grammarian Apollonius to the theoretical hierarchy of the parts of speech. However, there remained a persistent dichotomy between the actual properties of their language and the rules and principles the rhetoricians and grammarians imposed. It is therefore not surprising that for Dionysius the philosophical principles of nature ultimately had to succumb to Homer’s famous poems, which appeared to care nothing for nature. *Natura artis magistra*, but she cannot stand up to Homer.

Notes

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1. Democritus frg. 68B 154 Diels/Kranz; Diogenes Laertius VII, 87; Epicurus frg. 202 Usener.
2. The distinction between ‘realistic’ and ‘idealistic’ views of nature is borrowed from Boswell (1980:11–13).
4. The theory of natural word order is mentioned by the rhetoricians Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Comp.* 5), Demetrius (*Eloc.* 199–201), Longinus (*Subl.* 22) and Quintilian (*Inst.* IX, 4, 23–27) and in different terms by the grammarian Apollonius Dyscolus (*Synt.* 1,13–27). The agreements between the passages have been pointed out by Scaglione (1972:74–96) and Schenkeveld (1983:67–94).
5. Most of the principles are also discussed by Quintilian (*Inst.* IX, 4, 23–27), who seems to quote Dionysius.
16. F.D.S. 849.

Sources


References