The article by Mehler and Nespor defends the idea that rhythm may provide an initial perspective into the structure of language. The authors report the results of experimental studies carried out by Mehler and his collaborators, among others, which clearly suggest that some physical properties of the language play an important role in first-language acquisition in that they determine the way children set some basic parameters of their first language. The experimental studies lead the authors to conclude that on the basis of the specific rhythmic class of their first language (stress-timed, syllable-timed, mora-timed), infants may derive information about the size of the syllabic repertoire of the language they hear (CV, V, CCV, CVC, etc.). They furthermore speculate that rhythm may bias the infant to segment speech signals into smaller or larger units and thus provide some information about the mean size of the more frequent words. Finally, they mention other studies by Nespor, which suggest that the rhythmic organization of utterances provides cues as to the setting of basic syntactic parameters such as the head-complement parameter. This paper not only gives a careful survey of recent research on the connection of rhythm and language, but it also points out important guidelines for future investigation of the way the rhythmic properties of the speech signal contribute to the acquisition of the first language, and for investigation of the extent to which the identification of rhythm might not be language-specific.

This book is a major contribution to the theoretical foundations of the biolinguistic approach as well as to the understanding of the interaction of the language faculty with other components of the mind/brain.

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Reviewed by Maggie Tallerman, University of Newcastle upon Tyne

The idea that verb-initial languages might constitute a uniform set has been discredited at least since McCloskey 1996, and this volume amply demonstrates that, indeed, they do not. A brief introduction by the editors precedes sixteen papers covering a variety of Austroasiatic, Celtic, and other languages that have been claimed to be verb-initial (in some way). The book is divided into two parts.
Part 1 looks at ‘VP-movement vs. head-movement’, and a good start is made by Sandra Chung’s ‘What fronts? On the VP-raising account of verb-initial order’. Many analyses inspired by the research program initiated by Kayne (1994) have suggested that (some) V-initial languages are derived by VP-fronting. Chung systematically works through the kind of evidence that would have to be adduced in order to test this claim. She suggests that if whole (or remnant) VPs do front, then, like other moved constituents, they should (i) raise across clause boundaries, but (ii) not permit movement from within themselves— in other words, VPs should be islands. The first test is definitely failed by VPs: they do not raise across clause boundaries. The results of the second test prove more equivocal: in only some of the languages investigated are VPs islands. Chung then asks which independent principles would force VP raising. In some languages, the properties associated with the Spec, TP position are apparently not confined to subjects, but may apply to VPs, too. The extended projection principle (EPP) will therefore play a role in forcing VP raising. The paper is carefully argued and suggests directions for future research.

Along with the V-fronting and predicate-raising classes of verb-first languages, there are at least two other ways to derive the observed word order: subject-lowering, as established by Chung for Chamorro, and, as proposed by Henry Davis in ‘Coordination and constituency in St’a’t’imcets (Lillooet Salish)’, via ‘right-conjunct extraposition’. Davis argues that St’a’t’imcets, which displays a VSO/VOS alternation, is conventionally configurational, with arguments in argument positions rather than adjunct positions à la Jelinek. There is clear evidence for a VP (i.e. excluding the subject). Davis shows that superficially, one might think that subject lowering was the right analysis of St’a’t’imcets, too, but coordination evidence proves this to be incorrect. The theoretical implications are interesting, because no current model captures the generalizations (57). Again, this is a carefully argued paper.

Yuko Otsuka, in ‘Two derivations of VSO: A comparative study of Niuean and Tongan’, again makes it clear that V-initial order arises differently in different languages, even in these two closely related Polynesian languages. Otsuka agrees with Diane Massam that in Niuean, the derivation involves VP-remnant movement, but argues that in Tongan, it is V-to-T-to-C movement. The evidence involves the distribution of clitic pronouns and scrambling. Note that nonverbal predicates are also initial in Tongan, an order accounted for by proposing that such predicates are also heads, rather than XP’s, so like verbs they undergo movement to C.

Felicia Lee, in ‘Force first: Clause-fronting and clause typing in San Lucas Quiavivi Zapotec’, argues for both the overt and covert raising of whole clauses. Various question and other particles appear in an expected clause-final position, despite the strong head-initial character of the language. Lee argues that these particles represent Force heads, and are generated in a head-initial position, but that the surface order is derived by fronting the remainder of the clause to the specifier position of ForceP. This analysis is supported by the fact that very similar question particles in the language do have a sentence-initial position. Lee concludes that ‘clause typing’ (Cheng 1997) in this variety of Zapotec is realized either via question particles, which are base-generated in ForceP, or else by clause fronting into ForceP. As Lee notes, this is contrary to the generalization proposed in the following paper by Oda, which proposes that VP-fronting languages cannot type a clause by movement, so must use an initial particle for this purpose instead.

Kenji Oda, in ‘V1 and wh-questions: A typology’, proposes just two sources for V-initial order: V-movement and VP-movement. The rhetoric is initially promising: Oda notes that recent analyses ‘provide an almost embarrassing wealth of possibilities for achieving V-initial word order’ (109) and suggests a more restricted derivation. One of the more startling proposals here is the idea that, despite a long tradition of deriving its word order via V-fronting, Irish is in fact a VP-fronting language. Since Irish does not have rich and uniform subject/verb agreement or a V/S/SV alternation in word order, but does display predicate nominal fronting, Oda suggests that it is typologically more like a typical VP-fronting language. However, Irish fails the remaining two diagnostics proposed for such languages. One of these is rather serious: VP-movement languages are supposed to display wi-in-situ, but Irish displays obligatory wi-fronting. Oda argues that ‘even though Irish is not a wi-fronting language, the wi-word appears initially for morphological reasons’ (125). The arguments appear tenacious, and the conclusion, that Irish word
order is derived by VP-rather than V-movement, does not seem to buy anything valuable enough to justify the claims being made.

In contrast to the papers discussed so far, which present extensive data and detailed empirical argumentation, Dino Bury’s chapter, ‘Preverbal particles in verb-initial languages’, is mostly (highly) technical. Bury aims to show why V-initial languages typically have preverbal particles. The idea is that whenever a verb raises to a derived head position, it must be preceded by some filled specifier; a good example is Germanic V2. V-initial languages also have head-movement of V, but can meet the generalization above if the verb is preceded by a particle; Bury’s model does not distinguish between phrase-level and word-level categories. But in Welsh, which Bury uses for illustration, neither a particle nor its mutation effects are obligatory, and claiming that the particle is really present just obscures the facts.

Despite the modest claims suggested by the title of James McCloskey’s paper, ‘A note on predicates and heads in Irish clausal syntax’, this is in fact McCloskey’s typical, rigorous work, relentlessly pursuing the implications of various theoretical assumptions. McCloskey argues, contra Oda, that predicate raising cannot account for all clause types in Irish. Both verbal and adjectival heads are shown to undergo head (not phrasal) movement. As always, much is gained from McCloskey’s thorough familiarity with the data. The conclusions are clear: predicate fronting does not account for Irish initial verbs, so verbal and verbless clauses cannot be unified in this way.

Arthur Holmer, in ‘Seediq: Antisymmetry and final particles in a Formosan VOS language’, offers an extremely elegant and empirically well-supported antisymmetrical treatment of the apparently contradictory word order in Seediq. The language is clearly head-initial, yet clause-final particles. Predicate raising from the complement positions of these captures the fact that the heads themselves are left behind, thus giving the appearance of head-final order. The antisymmetry account also predicts that we should not find V-final languages with initial particles, that is, the mirror image of Seediq. It will be interesting to see if this is borne out.

Iterative predicate fronting within an antisymmetric approach occurs in Holmer’s paper and is also proposed by Lisa deMena Travin in ‘VP-internal structure in a VOS language’. The data involve VP-ellipsis in Malagasy, which looks very different from that in SVO or VSO languages. The relevance of iterative predicate raising is that languages displaying this ‘must move their predicate complements into specifier positions’ (218). The result is that what is handled by complementation in many languages occurs as a spec/head relation in Malagasy, with specific requirements for the licensing of the specifier.

Part 2, ‘Categories, information structure, and prosodic factors’, opens with a nicely succinct paper, ‘Lexical categories, lack of inflection, and predicate fronting in Nias’, by Diane Massam. She investigates Nias’ apparent lack of a noun/verb distinction and the relationship with both predicate fronting and the absence of a copula verb. Morphosyntactically, Nias predicates lack all features of finiteness, tense, and agreement; the absence of inflectional features means that V-fronting will not occur, since the predicates ‘do not enter into the head system of the language’ (238). Nonetheless, Massam shows that there are two distinct major lexical categories in the language. Predicate fronting itself receives a briefer treatment, but the idea is that all languages have some kind of clausal bifunction (240): the subject moves out of the thematic domain in a language like English, but the predicate does so in Nias (and similar languages).

I wonder, though, how the Celtic languages fit into this typology, with their initial verbs auxiliaries and raised subjects, but also in-situ VPs.

The question of an impoverished inventory of lexical categories also arises in David Gil’s ‘Word order without syntactic categories: How Riau Indonesian does it’. The central idea is that the verb-initial character of the language is epiphenomenal, and is due to (i) its general head-modifier order, and (ii) principles of information structure, such as iconicity. Gil also claims, however, that the language has no distinctions between lexical categories (including N and V), between heads and phrases, or between NPs and clauses (245); in addition, one finds no lexical/functional category distinction, no clear grammatical relations, and no way of distinguishing these anyway, that is, no case, no agreement, and no fixed word order. In fact, there is only one
syntactic category, S (sentence). Minimalism, then, but not as we know it. The problem is that
the limited amount of data and discussion here just is not enough to allow the reader to judge
the validity of these astonishing claims; moreover, some of the footnotes suggest room for dispute.
Though Gil has fleshed out these contentions elsewhere, the paper ought to be free standing in
the volume, but is not.

The same charge—that the paper does not really stand alone—can also be made about Mélanie
Jouitteau’s ‘Nominal properties of vPs in Breton: A hypothesis for the typology of VSO lan-
guages’. This reads much like what it is, a small part out of the middle of a long Ph.D. thesis,
and unfortunately, many background assumptions are not explained fully. When the author is
working within some variant of minimalism, this is particularly serious—the unenlightened
reader will not be convinced by a claim that, given assumptions X, Y, and Z, ‘this account
predicts the exact pattern of the verbal agreement system of Breton’ (266).

Hilda Koopman, in ‘On the parallelism of DPs and clauses: Evidence from Kisongo Maasai’,
starts from her premise in earlier work that common nouns are actually [D CP] structures—in
fact, relative clauses. Thus, we find various parallels between DPs and clauses, but also areas
of differentiation that must be accounted for. Like the previous three authors, Koopman addresses
the question of an apparent lack of categorial distinction in (some) verb-initial languages. In
some cases, verbs are said to show nominal properties (as Jouitteau’s chapter claims for Breton);
in Maasai, nouns display clausal properties. It is not clear, though, what simple property could
relate these characteristics across a broad spectrum of verb-initial languages.

If the preceding three chapters fail to provide relevant background information, the next chap-
ter, ‘Ordering clitics and postverbal R-expressions in Tagalog: A unified analysis?’, by Loren
Billings, more than makes up. This is a longer paper than most, but the wealth of detail concern-
ing the various word orders and the morphosyntax of the clitic system is amply justified. Billings
concludes that the ang-marked nominal in Tagalog (the one sometimes termed a topic or a focus
and linked to the verb via the verbal morphology) is in fact the subject. Semantic roles are not
relevant here: sometimes the subject is “actor”, but it may also be a theme, even when the clause
contains a distinct actor nominal. Subjects must, however, have the property of specificity (not
definiteness). Seen this way, subjects are final in Tagalog in unmarked word order. Given the
extensive discussion of the clitic system, I was sorry that the question of second-position phenom-
ena was omitted, though that would necessarily have required more space.

The chapter on ‘The syntax of Chalcatongo Mixtec: Preverbal and postverbal’ by Monica
Macaulay is a straightforward, largely descriptive piece on a VSO language that allows two
distinct kinds of preverbal constituents, a focus and a topic. This is clear and well-argued and
usefully relates the phenomena to similar data in other verb-initial languages.

The final chapter is ‘Accounting for verb-initial order in an Australian language’, that is,
Wanyi, by Mary Laughren, Robert Pennalzen, and Tom Mulcair. In Wanyi, Spec, CP is
characteristically filled by some focus-bearing XP, WH-phrase, or negative phrase, but when no
phrase of this type occupies the slot, then either a verbal or nominal predicate must raise to that
position instead, often resulting in verb-initial finite clauses. Thus, Wanyi, unlike most Australian
languages, has neutral V1 affirmative declarative clauses. Since the position targeted by move-
ment is a specifier, then the predicate must also be a phrasal category, and the authors offer
evidence that this is so. The verb-initial nature of Wanyi is then distinct from head raising in
Celtic or subject lowering in Chamorro or VP fronting in Niuean, demonstrating clearly that
‘verb-first’ indeed covers a number of disparate typological characteristics.

Overall, this is a reasonable collection, varying in quality from closely argued and fascinating
to somewhat underwhelming. There are no major conclusions, apart from the negative one that
there is no “verb-initial” language type—but at least we must all now be convinced that this is
so.

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Language is grounded in the human mind/brain, and linguists agree that language, notably grammar, is to a large extent the way it is because of cognitive and neurological constraints that underlie the use and structure of language. The nature of these constraints, however, is controversial. Following Noam Chomsky, many linguists assume that children are endowed with an innate universal grammar consisting of principles and categories that are exclusively needed for language. Ewa Dabrowska’s fascinating book, Language, mind and brain, shows that there are alternative ways of looking at the cognitive and neurological foundations of language. The human mind/brain constrains language, notably grammar, not through innate linguistic principles and categories, but through more general cognitive mechanisms that are not needed only for language. Drawing on studies from various subfields of cognitive science, D argues that there is no compelling evidence for linguistic innateness, genetically specified modularity, and language maturation. It is the purpose of this book to inform the reader about alternative ways of looking at the cognitive and neurological foundations of language without imposing a comprehensive new psychological theory of language.

The book is divided into two major parts. Part 1, ‘The basic specifications’, consists of five chapters providing an overview of relevant issues in sentence processing, language acquisition, neurolinguistics, and evolutionary biology. The five chapters are written for readers with little or no prior knowledge of these disciplines, providing the basis for the second part of the book, ‘The building blocks of language’. Part 2 consists of three case studies that consider the cognitive underpinnings of particular linguistic phenomena: the semantics of locative expressions, the status of morphological rules, and the syntax of questions. The final chapter of the book presents a sketch of cognitive grammar (Langacker 1987, 1991), which according to D provides a useful theoretical framework for the phenomena discussed in the preceding chapters.

Following a short introduction (Ch. 1), in which D emphasizes that linguistics can benefit from the insights of other disciplines, she begins with a chapter on sentence processing (Ch. 2) that characterizes her view of grammar. Language is a multidimensional phenomenon, and language processing can be a tremendously complex task. It involves the recognition of highly variable speech sounds, access to stored linguistic knowledge, the resolution of semantic ambiguities, the parsing of syntactic structures, and the integration of linguistic and nonlinguistic information into a coherent interpretation. All of these processes occur in milliseconds, causing great problems for computer programs designed to process natural language, while the human mind has no difficulties in producing and comprehending language. One reason why human beings are so good at processing language is that they make extensive use of simple heuristics, or ‘processing shortcuts’, that allow the human processor to deal with complex linguistic structures without