Word order typology and the SOVX order of Mande

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Mande languages are characterized by the SOVX word order pattern: objects precede the verb but all other arguments and adjuncts follow it. In the study of word order typology, the SOVX word order pattern is viewed as rare or perhaps exceptional, and is often explained as a historical quirk (e.g., Givón (1975, 1979) treats Mande languages as languages "in transition" from SOV to SVO). Another explanation is suggested by Koopman (1984: 126-8) for Mahou (Central Mande) and is intended to account for the syntax of Mande languages in general (Koopman (1984: 127); also Travis (1989) for Kpelle). On this analysis, verbs are assumed to assign their theta-role to the right but Case to the left, i.e. both object NPs and PP arguments are generated in the post-verbal position, but object NPs move into the preverbal position in order to be assigned Case.

In this paper, I argue against the movement-based explanation based on a more detailed analysis of the syntax of embedded clauses in Wan (Southeastern Mande). In Wan, PPs invariably follow the main verb, independently of the position of the embedded verb that selects for them, suggesting that postpositional arguments do not form a constituent with their verb and are instead adjoined to the IP. This evidence is problematic for movement-based accounts that presuppose that arguments originate next to the verb that subcategorizes for them. I discuss general implications of the SOVX syntax of Mande for the syntactic theory and suggest how this unusual word order pattern developed historically.