

Making Sense of Dutch Word Order

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Note: Although Dutch and Flemish are officially the same language, the explanation below does not apply as is to Flemish, which differs in details I do not know enough about.

1 Introduction

Word order in a Dutch sentence is a confusing subject, of which many descriptions exist. The explanation given below is unconventional, but is the simplest I can come up with and still cover all the facts.¹

As to word order, six types of sentences must be distinguished:

main clauses	start with the subject	Type I.1
dependent clauses	start with a conjunction	Type III
inverted clauses	like main clauses, but start with something else	Type I.2
yes-no questions		Type II
Wh-questions	start with a question word like Who, Where, When	Type I.2
commands	instructions, not the more usual polite requests	Type II

where the last column shows the types EDG assigns to the clauses.² Examples follow below.

This list can immediately be simplified, because: 1. a command has the same word order as a main clause from which the subject has been removed; 2. a Wh-question has the same word order as an inverted clause; and 3. a yes-no question has the same word order as an inverted clause from which the “something else” has been removed.

The remaining three clause types have different word orders, as can be seen from the following simple examples, which have been grouped by similarity:

¹I assume some familiarity with grammatical terms, for example “subject”, etc. There is a fine list of these terms in the back of “Essential Dutch Grammar” by H.R. Stern. I’ll refer to this booklet as “EDG”.

²A “conjunction” is a word that connects two clauses, for example ‘that’, ‘because’ or ‘when’. In Dutch the conjunctions “maar” (‘but’) and “want” (‘for’) start main clauses, but all the others start dependent clauses. For “en” and “of” see EDG.

main clause	1 2 3 Ik lees een boek	I read a book
command	2 3 Lees een boek!	Read a book!
–		
inverted clause	2 1 3 Daarom lees ik een boek	That’s why I read a book
Wh-question	2 1 3 Waarom lees ik een boek?	Why do I read a book?
yes-no question	2 1 3 Lees ik een boek?	Do I read a book?
–		
dependent clause	1 3 2 Jan ziet dat ik een boek lees	John sees that I read a book

Indeed the command is similar to the main clause without the subject:

Ik lees een boek
Lees een boek!

and the two types of questions are similar to the inverted main clause. It turns out that these similarities always hold, even for much more complicated sentences, so we can forget about these three types.

There is one more simplification that can be made: the inverted clause can always be derived from the corresponding main clause by swapping subject and conjugated verb:

Ik lees een boek
Daarom lees ik een boek

(This follows a mysterious rule which says that the conjugated verb often comes at the second position. We find this rule in several unrelated languages, for example in Biblical Hebrew.)

This leaves us with two essentially different sentence types, main clauses and dependent clauses. So, one would say, let’s learn both patterns and we’re done. Unfortunately the word order also depends on the tense (past, present, or future), and on further specifications to the verb (e.g. “een boek”). Also, some verbs require a different word order than other verbs.

2 Verb Groups

The basis of the explanation is the “verb group” (“werkwoordsgroep”), which consists of the main verb of the sentence, plus all the further specifications³

³I need a translation of Dutch “precisering” here, but none seems to exist. ‘Clarification’? ‘Determination’? ‘Further determination’ or ‘narrowing down’ would be right but are unwieldy. The technical term is “adjunct”, but that does not really help either.

the speaker wants to add to it. This includes about everything in the sentence except the subject.

Generally speaking, Dutch places the specifications in front of the main verb, and English puts them after it. This often leads to a nice symmetry:

kopen - buying
een auto kopen - buying a car
vandaag een auto kopen - buying a car today

Here the verb “kopen” is underlined to show that it is the main verb in the verb group; this is necessary because there may be other verbs in a verb group.

2.1 Uses of the Verb Group

Verb groups can be used unmodified with quite a number of auxiliary verbs and a subject, to construct a sentence:

Jan gaat vandaag een auto kopen - John is going to buy a car today
(future)
Ik wil vandaag een auto kopen - I want to buy a car today (1)
(desire)
Hij moet vandaag een auto kopen - He has to buy a car today
(necessity)
Jullie mogen vandaag een auto kopen - You can buy a car today
(permission)
Wij zouden vandaag een auto kopen - We would buy a car today
(irrealis)

where the meaning of the auxiliary verb has been provided between parentheses. Some auxiliary verbs require a different form of the main verb, the past participle:

Wij hebben vandaag een auto gekocht - We bought a car today (2)
(past)

and others require another form of the infinitive:⁴

Wij zijn van plan vandaag een auto te kopen - We plan to buy a car today
(intent)

Verb groups can also be used as subjects in sentences, often with the verb “zijn”:

Kopen kost geld - Buying costs money
Een auto kopen is leuk - Buying a car is fun
Vandaag een auto kopen is geen goed idee - Buying a car today is not a good idea

The verb group is also used in dependent clauses, where its main verb is conjugated according to the subject of the dependent clause:

⁴Dutch has two forms of the infinitive, “kopen” and “te kopen”. English has three: ‘buy’, as in ‘I will buy’; ‘to buy’, as in ‘I want to buy’; and ‘buying’, as in ‘I stopped buying’.

Zijn baas wil dat hij vandaag een auto koopt -

His boss wants him to buy a car today

where “hij” is the subject of “koopt”.

We have seen that past and future can be expressed using auxiliary verbs (“hebben” or “zijn” for the past,⁵ “gaan” for the future), and if we had an auxiliary verb to express the present tense we could say:

Ik ... vandaag een auto kopen - I am buying a car today
(present)

but there is no such auxiliary verb. The problem is solved by pulling the main verb out of the verb group, putting it on the dots above (in second position!), and conjugating it for the subject:

Ik koop vandaag een auto - I am buying a car today
(present)

We see that the present tense, which grammar books usually treat first and as the most basic item, is actually the exception.

Summary of the uses of a verb group:

with aux. verb	<subj.>	<conj. aux. vb>	<verb group as is>
	Ik	wil	vandaag een auto <u>kopen</u> .
	<subj.>	<conj. spec. aux. vb>	<verb group, past part.>
	Ik	“hebben”, “zijn” heb	vandaag een auto <u>gekocht</u> .
as a subject	<verb group as is>		<some conj. vb> ...
	Vandaag een auto <u>kopen</u>		is ...
dependent cl.	... ‘dat’	<subj.>	<verb group with conj. vb>
	... dat	ik	vandaag een auto <u>koop</u>
main clause	<subj.>	<conj. verb>	<verb group, conj. vb pulled out>
	Ik	<u>koop</u>	vandaag een auto

EDG calls the conjugated verb the “working verb”⁶, and calls a verb group in which the verb has been conjugated a “predicate”.

2.2 A Second Example

A continuation of our car-buying story could be: “and I’ll take it with me right away = en ik neem hem meteen mee”. The build-up of the verb group is:

⁵Most verbs require “hebben” for the past, as in English, but some require “zijn”; for the details see EDG.

⁶Linguists call it the “finite verb”, which is even more obscure.

nemen - to take
menemen - to take along
meteen menemen - to take along right away
hem meteen menemen - to take it (the car) along right away

Note that the Dutch and English word orders are no longer each other's exact mirror image; this will be explained in Section 3.3.

With, for example, the auxiliary verb "willen" (= to want), this verb group leads immediately to

Ik wil hem meteen menemen - I want to take it along right away

The verb group can again be used in a dependent clause, if we conjugate the main verb:

Mijn baas wil dat ik hem meteen meneem -
My boss wants me to take it along right away

And if we want to use the verb group for the simple present, we have to apply the trick shown above and pull the main verb out of it and conjugate it:

Ik neem hem meteen mee - I take it with me right away

We see that the word "meenemen", which is always written as one word, falls apart when the main verb "nemen" is pulled out of it. Although the spelling seems to contradict it, the structural similarity between "meenemen" and "een auto kopen" is confirmed when we consider the past participle of both forms: "meegenomen" and "een auto gekocht": the "ge-" is inserted in the same place. The same happens when we use the verb groups with an auxiliary verb that requires an infinitive with "te":

We zijn van plan vandaag een auto te kopen, en hem meteen mee te nemen. -
We intend to buy a car today and to take it with us right away.

"Mee" is just the first (most important) specification to the verb "nemen", just as "een auto" is to the verb "kopen".

2.3 Auxiliary Verbs in the Verb Group

More evidence of the structural similarity between "meenemen" and "een auto kopen" is obtained when we insert an auxiliary verb in the verb group. It lands in the same place as the "ge-" and the "te":

vandaag een auto willen kopen - to want to buy a car today
hem meteen mee willen nemen - to want to take it along right away

Again these can be used in dependent clauses by just conjugating the verb:

Ze weten al dat U vandaag een auto wilt kopen,
en hem meteen mee wilt nemen. -
They already know that you want to buy a car today
and want to take it with you right away.

We see that the auxiliary verb binds even more closely to the main verb than the specifications “mee” or “een auto” do. And, equally importantly, the auxiliary is now the one that is going to be conjugated: it is the working verb, while “kopen” and “nemen” remain the main verbs.

So when we use this verb group in a main clause by pulling out the working verb and putting it in second position, we get for example

Ik wil vandaag een auto kopen - I want to buy a car today (3)

We see, probably somewhat to our amazement, that this is identical to sentence (1) on page 3. So the sentences (1) and (3) can be understood as deriving from the verb group “een auto kopen” plus the present of the desiderative auxiliary “willen”, or as the present tense of the verb group “een auto willen kopen” (or actually both).

The same applies to the past tense, but with a small modification. We saw that its auxiliary verb “hebben” (or “zijn”) requires a past participle rather than an infinitive; it also requires a different position when it is added to the verb group:

vandaag een auto gekocht hebben - having bought a car today

The verb group can be used as a subject:

Een auto gekocht hebben geeft een voldaan gevoel. -
Having bought a car gives a satisfied feeling.

or in a dependent clause:

Ik dacht dat hij vandaag een auto gekocht had. -
I thought he had bought a car today.

or in a main clause, with pulled out working verb:

Wij hebben vandaag een auto gekocht. - We bought a car today (4).

Sentence (4) is again equal to sentence (2) on page 3.

Needless to say, all this also applies to auxiliaries that require an infinitive with “te”: “van plan zijn een auto te kopen”.

2.4 More Than One Verb in a Verb Group

A verb group like

hem meteen mee willen nemen - to want to take it along right away

shows that an auxiliary verb inserts itself between the verb or verbs already there and the other specifications, however tightly these may seem to bind. This extends to any verb that can act on another verb:

de kinderen leren zwemmen - to teach the children to swim

This gives us the word order in a dependent clause:

Hij zegt dat Marie de kinderen leert zwemmen -
He says that Mary is teaching the children to swim

and, for example, an inverted main clause (with the working verb pulled out to second position):

Gisteren leerde Marie de kinderen zwemmen -
Yesterday Mary was teaching the children to swim
and all the other forms.

More verbs can be added, for example “proberen te” (to try to):

de kinderen proberen te leren zwemmen -
to try to teach the children to swim

Examples: main clause with pulled out working verb

Marie probeerde de kinderen te leren zwemmen -
Mary tried to teach the children to swim

and dependent clause:

Hij zag dat Marie de kinderen probeerde te leren zwemmen -
He saw Mary trying to teach the children to swim

There is a remarkable exception here: when there is more than one infinitive in the verb group the auxiliary verbs of the past tense, “hebben” and “zijn”, give up their special requirements. They no longer require a past participle or a special position and act just like the other auxiliary verbs:

de kinderen hebben leren zwemmen -
having taught the children to swim

and not

*de kinderen *geleerd* zwemmen hebben -
having *taught* the children to swim

as in English (and in German). (The * before the sentence means that it is incorrect and shown for explanation purposes only.)

Examples: main clause with pulled out working verb

Marie had de kinderen leren zwemmen -
Mary had taught the children to swim

and dependent clause:

Hij wist dat Marie de kinderen had leren zwemmen -
He knew Mary to have taught the children to swim

Infinitives can be stacked quite high in Dutch: “blijven staan kijken” (‘to keep standing there and watch’) and “helpen leren zwemmen” (‘to help to learn to swim’) are quite normal examples. The system also includes the famous/notorious example

kijken - watch
staan kijken - stand and watch
blijven staan kijken - keep standing and watching
durven blijven staan kijken - dare to keep standing and watching
zien durven blijven staan kijken - to see someone daring to keep standing and watching
willen zien durven blijven staan kijken - to want to see someone daring to keep standing and watching
hebben willen zien durven blijven staan kijken - having wanted to see someone daring to keep standing and watching

This monster behaves completely according to the above patterns:

Ik zou jou wel eens hebben willen zien durven blijven staan kijken -
I would have liked to see you daring to keep standing and watching

or

Ik had jou wel eens willen zien durven blijven staan kijken. -
I would like to see you daring to keep standing and watching.
(with “wel eens willen” = ‘to like’).⁷

2.5 Relative clauses

The dependent clauses shown so far all depend on verbs, through the conjunction “dat”: “Hij ziet dat ik een auto koop” (‘He sees that I am buying a car’); these are called ‘subordinate clauses’. There is a second kind of dependent clause, which depends on a noun: “De auto die ik gekocht heb ...” (‘The car that I bought ...’). Such clauses are called ‘relative clauses’. They basically have the same word order as the verb group they derive from, but specifications can be pulled out of them.

When the subject is the head of the relative clause, it behaves as a subordinate clause. From “een auto gekocht hebben” we get:

Ik weet *dat* hij <een auto gekocht heeft> subordinate
De man *die* <een auto gekocht heeft> ... relative

Instead of the conjunction “dat” the relative clause uses the relative pronoun “die” for *de*-words and plurals, and “dat” for *het*-words. The relative pronoun is printed in *italic script* in these examples.⁸

If the head of the relative clause is a noun without a preposition in the verb group, the noun is pulled out:

De auto *die* hij <gekocht heeft> ... - The car he bought ...

Het schilderij *dat* hij <gekocht heeft> ... - The painting he bought ...

where the relative pronoun is “die” for “de auto” and “dat” for “het schilderij”.

If the noun has a preposition, it accompanies the noun to the front, and the relative pronoun changes to “wie” and “wat”. From

met zijn vrienden naar een feestje geweest zijn -
having been to a party with his friends

(note the mirror symmetry) we get

Zijn vrienden met *wie* hij naar een feestje geweest is ... -
His friends who he went to a party with ...

When we want “het feestje” as the head we would expect

*Het feestje naar *wat* hij met zijn vrienden geweest is ... -
The party to which he went with his friends ...

but here Dutch is in trouble: the combination “*naar wat” is forbidden. Just

⁷The context is the following: Two elderly ladies, one telling the other that a mouse had entered her kitchen and that she’d jumped on a chair and screamed. The other said: “I would never have done that.”, whereupon the first one said: “Ik zou jou wel eens hebben willen zien durven blijven staan kijken!” The story is probably not PC.

⁸For a good explanation of the difference between a conjunction and a relative pronoun see EDG, page 97.

as “*met het” (‘with it’) is replaced by “ermee”, and “*naar het” (‘to it’) by “ernaartoe”, so “*met wat” (‘with what’) is replaced by “waarmee”, and “*naar wat” (‘where to’) by “waarnaartoe”. This gets us

Het feestje *waarnaartoe* hij met zijn vrienden geweest is ...

Although correct, “waarnaartoe” is quite a mouthful, and most speakers of Dutch prefer to leave the “waar” in place, but stuff the “naartoe” back to the place where it was pulled from:

Het feestje *waar* hij met zijn vrienden *naar toe* geweest is ...

This is the normal, colloquial, way to say this in Dutch; usually the word “naar-toe” is also split, by adding a space between the parts.

3 Word Order inside the Verb Group

By introducing the “verb group” we have split the problem of word order in Dutch into two parts: how to determine the word order in the verb group, and how to construct sentences from a verb group. The second problem is syntactic, and has been covered above in Section 2; the first problem has semantic aspects and will be treated here, as far as possible.

A simple example shows that the word order in the verb group can be more semantically than syntactically determined:

Hij heeft zijn handen al drie keer gewassen -

He has washed his hands three times already

and

Hij heeft al drie keer zijn handen gewassen

are both correct, and the only difference, if there is one, is semantic.

Still, some rules can be formulated.

3.1 Syntactic Rules

The basic syntactic rule is that a verb group starts with the main verb and specifications are then added to it on the left; as a result the main verb is the last, right-most, in the group.

If verbs are used as specifications, they are the first to be added, on the left as usual:

zwemmen - to swim

leren zwemmen - to teach to swim

willen leren zwemmen - to want to teach to swim

Each subsequent verb applies to the verb group that is already there: “leren” applies to “zwemmen”, “willen” applies to “leren zwemmen”, etc., just as in English. And indeed Dutch agrees with the English word order here.

There is a strange phenomenon to observe here: the main verb remains “zwemmen” (it is all still about swimming), but the working verb stays at the front: “zwemmen” in the first verb group above, “leren” in the second, and “willen” in the third. So at the beginning of Section 2 we could immediately have distinguished between main verb and working verb, as was already hinted at in Section 2.3. But since the two differ only when verbs are used as specifications, that might have complicated the explanation prematurely. We shall now distinguish them by printing the main verb **bold** and the working verb underlined.

Non-verb specifications can now be added in front of the composite verb group. For example, a verb group

vandaag de kinderen hebben willen leren **zwemmen** -
 having wanted to teach the children to swim today

can be used in any clause, for example a subordinate clause:

Ze zei dat ze vandaag de kinderen had willen leren **zwemmen** -
 She said she'd wanted to teach the children to swim today

or for example in a relative clause:

De kinderen *die* ze vandaag had willen leren **zwemmen** ... -
 The children whom she'd wanted to teach to swim today ...

If the main verb is a “separable verb”, any auxiliary verbs insert themselves between the preposition and the verb:

nemen - to take
meenemen - to take along
mee kunnen nemen - to be able to take along
mee hebben kunnen nemen - having been able to take along
 al die bagage niet **mee hebben kunnen nemen** - not having been able to
 take along all that luggage

With a pulled-out working verb, this yields for example:

Ik heb al die bagage niet **mee kunnen nemen** -
 I have not been able to take along all that luggage

3.2 The Semantic Component

Once the specifications that are verbs are in place, more specifications can be added to the left, but the order of these is in some situations rather strict and in other situations rather flexible. A few examples of flexible placement, with their semantic differences are:

We hebben de nieuwe auto meteen meegenomen -
 We took the new car with us right away

We hebben meteen de nieuwe auto meegenomen -
 While we were doing / picking up other things, we also picked up the new car

Een taart kan men met een mes snijden -
One can cut a cake with a knife (explains how to cut a cake) (5a)

Met een mes kan men een taart snijden -
One can use a knife to cut a cake (explains what to do with a knife) (5b)

(Note that in the last two examples the most significant specification was moved to the front for emphasis, causing the clauses to become inverted and subject and working verb to swap places.)

But often the order is strict:

Ik zie nergens een kat - I don't see a cat anywhere (6a)

Ik zie de kat nergens - I don't see the cat anywhere (6b)

are both correct, but the two other combinations

*Ik zie een kat nergens

*Ik zie nergens de kat

are downright wrong.⁹

The basic semantic rule of composing a verb group is: at each stage of the composition the verb group must represent a concept, to which the next addition can be applied to make it a more specific concept. This means that in a completed verb group the rightmost elements are the most general, the most traditional, the most unspecific, and the leftmost elements are the most incidental, the most specific.

Example:

kopen - a very general concept

een auto kopen - a fairly general concept

vandaag een auto kopen - a fairly specific concept

which leads to

We willen vandaag een auto kopen. -

We want to buy a car today.

The opposite order would not work:

kopen - very general concept

vandaag kopen - a highly specific concept

*een auto vandaag kopen - "vandaag kopen" is too specific to be made more specific by the rather vague notion "een auto"

But if we replace "een auto" by a more specific concept, we can make it work:

kopen - very general concept

vandaag kopen - a highly specific concept

onze nieuwe auto vandaag kopen - but "onze nieuwe auto" makes it even more specific

and leads to

We willen onze nieuwe auto vandaag kopen.

⁹The semantic component is made even more clear by the fact that the second incorrect phrase has correct variants: "Ik ben vaak bij hem thuis geweest maar ik heb nooit de wijnkelder gezien" ('I've often been to his home but I've never seen the wine cellar.')

Components of a verb group, in order of appearance:

1. Nouns with definite article or possessive pronoun; pronouns; proper names.
2. Specifications of time.
3. Various other specifications.
4. Specifications of place.
5. Nouns with an indefinite article or no article.
6. Nouns, with or without article, preceded by a preposition.
7. The preposition (prefix) of a separable main verb.
8. Auxiliary or other verbs.
9. The main verb.
10. Various other specifications, usually in the order 2 to 6 (not covered here)

This list is probably incomplete.

The rule can often be used to decide between two competing word orders: which is better, “vandaag naar Amsterdam gaan” or “naar Amsterdam vandaag gaan”? The first is based on “naar Amsterdam gaan”, which is a general concept, but the second is based on “vandaag gaan”, which is a strange and therefore highly specific concept. So the first wins.¹⁰

3.3 Some rules

Now it would be nice if all specifications could be ordered with respect to each other, and so yield a list that would immediately tell us how to construct a Dutch verb group. But the example on the preceding page with the cake and the knife (5a and 5b) tells us already that this will not be possible. Still, a general list can be made; it is shown between the horizontal lines on this page. The specifications are listed in the order in which one meets them when one reads or listens, from specific to general, although the actual structure is the reverse, from general to specific, as shown in the many examples above.¹¹

A quite natural example (though less so in English):

¹⁰The verb group “vandaag gaan”, *can* be used, but only in very specific circumstances, for example: “Wanneer zullen we naar Amsterdam gaan? Laten we vandaag gaan!”

¹¹It is acknowledged that this “zooming out” from specific to general of Dutch sentences is a source of annoyance to foreigners.

Het verbaasde me dat hij zich (1) gisteren al (2) met het grootste gemak (3)
in zijn kleine stoeltje (4) om (7) kon (8) draaien (9). -
I was amazed that already yesterday he could with the greatest ease
turn around in his little chair.

The ordering also solves the “invisible cat” mystery on page 11 (sentences 6a
and 6b):

Ik zie nergens (4) een kat (5) - I don't see a cat anywhere
Ik zie de kat (1) nergens (4) - I don't see the cat anywhere

The negation word “niet” is usually inserted in the verb group in front of the
concept it negates:

We willen de auto (1) niet (-) meteen (3) meenemen (7, 9). -
We do not want to take the car along right away.

where “niet” has not been given a number.

The surprising forms “niet graag” and “liever niet” may derive from the above
ordering, or may just have to be learned:

Ik neem ze niet graag mee - I wouldn't like to take them with me.
Ik neem ze liever niet mee - I'd rather not take them with me.

Conclusion

By introducing the “verb group” the problem of word order in Dutch was split
into a purely syntactic part and a partly syntactic and partly semantic part. Be-
sides the “verb group”, the subject and the working verb were the only linguistic
notions needed; no notion of object or indirect object was used.