

Chapter 8. Learning Kawaiisu word order

If you've spent any time listening to elders speaking Kawaiisu, you've probably noticed a lot of flexibility in the order of words in Kawaiisu sentences. This can be very different from the usual word order in English sentences. In this chapter, we will explore why you might find one order versus another. These patterns should be considered tendencies, not rules, like some other aspects of grammar. Speakers have a lot of options about where to put words in each sentence and their choices are sometimes a matter of style and personal preference. When you're first learning the language, you might want to stick to the basic word order most of the time, but as you gain experience, you could try changing the order like the advanced speakers do.

Recognizing varieties of word order in sentences

As in many languages of the world, including English, the subject of a sentence in Kawaiisu often comes before the verb as shown in these sentences:

Wagüt tapukwineen otsüz(e).

The frog emerged from the jar.

subject verb

Su'un chipineen tibi.

He climbed the rock.

subject verb object

It is also very common in Kawaiisu for the subject of a sentence not to be mentioned at all if it has been mentioned earlier in a conversation or story. The subject can then be recognized from the agreement suffix on the verb. (If you need to review agreement suffixes, see the table in Chapter 3 on page X.) Fluent speakers say it sounds okay if singular subjects (I, you, he, John) are left out of the sentence at any time but that if plural subjects (they, we) are left out they need to have been mentioned recently or can be seen during the conversation.

Ne'etii-naam kuhna.

Built they fire.

(They built a fire.)

Su'uvois manikwee- neek- ün.

Then was doing (with my hands) something I.

(Then I was doing something (with my hands).)

Hüveezü- nün utsiküs.

Got up I this morning.

(I got up this morning.)

Sometimes the subject will come after the verb.

Kapaan otsüz(e) karineen wogita.

In the jar sits the frog.

verb subject

Tuhukidü kunavüz hinigeeneen.

A black purse she has. (She has a black purse.)

Putting the verb before the subject

Here are some of the factors why a speaker might choose verb-before-subject word order versus subject-before-verb word order. Verb-before-subject order is sometimes called “inverted” word order because is the reverse of what you might typically find in English. You may have heard speakers say that Kawaiisu is “backwards” compared to English when referring to verb-before-subject word order.

Recognizing common patterns of verb-before-subject word order

Most of the examples of inverted verb-before-subject order are sentence in which verbs have only a subject (intransitive verbs) such as verbs expressing emotions and motion. In the following examples, the subjects are underlined. You can see that the verb-subject word order in Kawaiisu in the opposite of the English sentences.

Naha'ineen iveet wagat.

The big frog was mad.

Muts suvu'idüm su'um.

They're all very happy.

Su'uvois pagikweeneen süna'av.

Then coyote was walking.

Su'uvois yozikineen evipiich wagat.

Then the little frog jumped.

Tasikweeneen süna'av.

Coyote choked.

Here are some example sentences of verbs with subject and objects (transitive verbs) where verb-before-subject order is found as well. In this example, the subject of the first sentence is *muhuts* ‘owl’ and comes after both the object and the verb.

Su'uvois tünaneen eepizhi muhutsi.

Then the owl chased the little boy.

Hin inid imi?

What are you doing?

Thus, while intransitive verbs might use the inverted verb-before-subject word order most often, inversion is possible with transitive verbs too.

Word order of sentences in stories that present new information

Verb-before-subject word order is also commonly found in sentences that present a new character in a story. These sentences can be translated as “There is/are...” or “There was/were...” in English. They often give details of the scene in which the story is taking place. The verb is usually one of the verbs that have only a subject (intransitive verbs) expressing position or posture (karü- ‘sit’, wünü- ‘stand’, havi- ‘lie’). There is often a phrase describing the position of something at the beginning of the sentence too, as in the following sentence describing the position of the owl “inside the hole.” In these examples the subjects/characters are underlined.

Kapaan hopakid karüneen muhutsi.

Inside the hole there sat an owl.

Muts awanaaka mosüb iva’an.

There’s a lot of trees.

Iva’an wününeen John Nicholas.

John Nicholas was standing there. (Standing there was John Nicholas.)

Kapaan otsüz karüneen wagata.

Inside the jar sat the frog.

Karüneena evipiich wagat pa’anaag iveet wagat totsiina.

The little frog was sitting on top of the big frog’s head.

Su’uvois waru’ineen iveet wagat uween.

Then the big frog was hanging over there.

Uween mukarüneen nanoos iveet wagat.

The big frog was sitting over there by himself.

Notice that English can have a similar inverted verb-before-subject word order in such circumstances, as in the example ‘Inside the jar sat the frog’ (where the subject *the frog* follows the verb *sat*).

Word order of sentences in stories that present old information

When telling a story, there will often be one character who performs several activities one after another. Usually this character is the subject of each sentence describing the activities. When this happens, it is common for the subject to come after the verb. These examples suggest that there is a loose principle of putting old or predictable information towards the end of the sentence. This same principle might actually prevent the inverted verb-subject order in some cases, when the same verb is applied to a series of characters. Here, it's the verb that is the old information (after the first time it's used), and it comes towards the end of the sentence. In these examples, the subjects are underlined.

Muhuts meeneen, "Hin inin eepizhi?"

The owl said, "What are you doing, little boy?"

Su'uvois tünaneen eepizhi muhutsi.

Then the owl chased the little boy.

Nü'ü ka'avaadü shi'in pagüüzi.

I'm going to eat this fish.

Hü'ü ka'avaad nü'ü uuv.

I'm going to eat well today.

Shi'in wagat uween iveet karüdü.

The big frog's sitting way over there.

Yuwaat haneeneen, nahai'id su'un.

He didn't say anything, he's angry.

Iveet wagat karümineen iva'an aaya.

The big frog is riding on the turtle.

Evipiich wagat karümineen kahambaavi.

The little frog is riding in the back.

Su'uvois muts ataabü iveet wagatü.

The big frog is very bad.

In this first example, several people perform the same action of rolling down a hill. The first sentence doesn't have a subject noun, but in each of the next two sentences the subject is found before the verb, not after it:

Muts müzikweeneen keevo-va'an.

She rolled fast down the hill.

Su'uvois Luther kahambaav müzikweeneen.

Then Luther was rolling behind her.

Su'uvois Betty kahambaav müzikweeneenen.
Then Betty was rolling behind her.

The second example involves an intransitive verb expressing emotion. This is a good candidate for the inverted verb-before-subject word order, and accordingly we find the subject *epiich* after the verb *suvu'ikweeneen*. In the next two sentences, however, the verb *suvu'ikweeneen* is “old news,” and might prevent the inverted verb-subject order:

Muts *suvu'ikweeneen* epiich.
The little boy got all happy.

Aaya *suvu'ikweeneen*.
The turtle was happy.

Puguz, *muts* *suvu'ikweeneen*.
The dog, he got excited (too).

This might also account for some examples such as the following:

Suui *havineek* edü.
One gun was lying there.

Here, the subject of the sentence is *suui edü*, ‘one gun’, but the two parts of the subject are on either side of the verb *havineek*. In the story where this sentence is taken from, the narrator has already been talking about guns (making *edü* old information), but the precise number of guns (*suui*) is new information.

Word order in quoted speech

It is very common for quoted speech to come before the verb *mee-* ‘to say’, and the person doing the talking to come after *mee*.

Su'una... tugun su'ur wü'ipün, meeneen piyüni uusüsu.
It was night when I was born, my mother said long ago.

“Yuwaat samanivaanaamü,” meeneen eepichi.
“Don't do that,” said the little boy.

Notice that this subject-verb inversion can occur even when the quotation comes at the end of the sentence:

Meeneena eepizh, “Hagaan su'un wagata?”
The little boy said, “Where's the frog?”

Word order in information questions

As discussed in Chapter 6, the information question word (interrogative pronoun), usually comes at the front of the sentence in Kawaiisu, just like in English. If the question word isn't the subject of the sentence, the subject often comes after the verb, especially if it's a pronoun:

Hin inid imi?

What are you doing?

Hin inidüm su'um?

What are they doing?

Hagaan idokwee shi'in?

Where's he going?

Object-subject word order

You will sometimes see the object (that is, the noun that receives the activity of the verb) of a transitive verb at the beginning of a sentence. This can happen when the object of one sentence is put into sharp contrast with the object of another. In the following example *suui*, *wahai tühüi* in the second sentence contrasts with *suui* 'one (deer)' in the first sentence, and it comes all the way at the front of the sentence.

Yüwaat nü'ü kukivaad suui.

I'm not going to shoot one (deer).

Suui, wahai tühüi nü'ü kukuvaad.

One, two deer I'm going to shoot.

Another place where this happens is in an information question where the question word is the object of the sentence, as we saw in chapter 6.

Inflexible word orders

While there is a fair amount of flexibility in Kawaiisu word order, there are some areas where the order cannot change willy-nilly. The full range of such cases is a topic that we've only just begun to explore, but here are a few cases.

Negation before verb

The negative particles *yuwaat* 'not' and *kid* 'don't' must always come before the verb. So the first two examples are acceptable, but the third one is not:

☺ Puguz yuwaat ka'avaaneen.

☺ Yuwaat puguz ka'avaaneen.

☹ Puguz ka'avaaneen yuwaat.

The dog is not going to eat.

[others? To be continued ...]