Multiple constructions through word order transposition

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Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.31356/silwp.vol14.04
Available at: https://commons.und.edu/sil-work-papers/vol14/iss1/4

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Vietnamese offers an outstanding illustration of the variety of grammatical constructions possible, simply by changing word order in a small but grammatically productive set of lexical items. The following sentences were offered to me several years ago by my Vietnamese language teacher, Mr. Nguyen Anh Khiêm. I believe they were entirely unsolicited. In the sentences, Mr. Khiêm transposes only five items into 39 sentence combinations. Since some of the 39 are structurally ambiguous, over 45 different meanings are represented.

The five items used include one pronoun, two verbs, and two functional particles. They are:

- **nó** (arrogant) 3rd person pronoun.
- **bảo** to say (to).
- **đến** to come.
- **không** not; (as final particle) or not?
- **sao** how; why; to matter.


1. Sao nó bảo không đến?
   Why did he say "Don't come"?
2. Sao nó không bảo đến?
   Why didn't he say to come?
3. Sao? Bảo nó đến không?
   How come? Did you tell him to come?
4. Sao bảo nó không đến?
   Why did you tell him not to come?
5. Sao không bảo nó đến?
   Why didn't you tell him to come?
6. Sao không đến bảo nó?
   Why didn't you come and tell him?
7. Sao? Đến bảo nó không?
   How come? Did you come and tell him?
8.  Nói đến không bảo sao?
He came but didn’t tell you, eh?
9.  Nói đến bảo sao không?
He came and said, "Why not?"
10. Nói đến bảo "không sao."
He came and said, "Never mind."
11. Nói đến, sao không bảo?
He came - why didn’t you tell him? He came - why didn’t he tell you?
12. Nói bảo sao không đến?
He said, "Why didn’t you come?"
13. Nói bảo "không đến sao?"
He said, "You didn’t come, eh?"
He said, "Come ahead."
15. Nói không bảo "sao đến?"
He didn’t say "Why did you come?"
16. Nói không bảo đến sao?
He didn’t say he would come, eh? He didn’t say for you to come, eh?
17. Nói không đến bảo sao?
He didn’t come and tell you, eh?
18. Bảo nó "sao không đến?
Say to him, "Why didn’t you come?"
19. Bảo nó "không đến sao?
Say to him, "you didn’t come, eh?
20. Bảo nó đến, sao không?
Why not tell him to come?
21. Bảo nó, "đến sao không?"
Say to him, "Why not come?"
22. Bảo nó "đđnh không sao."
Tell him, "Come ahead."
23. Bảo "sao nó không đến?"
Say, "Why didn’t he come?"
24. Bảo sao? Nói đến không?
What did you say? Did he come?
25. Bảo "không sao, nói đến."
Tell him, "Never mind, he came."
26. Không bảo sao nói đến?
You didn’t say, "Why did he come?"
27. Không bảo nói đến sao?
You didn’t tell him to come, eh?
28. Không đến bảo nói sao?
You didn’t come and tell him, eh?
29. Không đến. Nói bảo sao?
He didn’t come. What did he say? You didn’t come. So what did he say?
Never mind. Tell him to come.
31. Đến bảo nó không bảo sao.
You came and told him, "Never mind."
32. Đến bảo nó "sao không?"
You came and told him, "Why not?"
33. Đến không bảo nó sao?
You came, but didn’t tell him, eh?
A first quick glance would indicate the following as paradigms.
(More careful study might well divide the 3rd into two.)

I. Nos. 1, 2, 12, 13, 14, 15  
(You) come, he tell
II. 6, 7, 28, 31, 32, 33  
(You) come, (you) tell him
III. 3, 4, 5, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30  
(You) tell, he come
IV. 8, 9, 10, 17  
he come, he tell

The following are structurally ambiguous:
No. 11  
he come, ? tell
Nos. 16, 29, 34, 36, 38, 39  
he tell, ? come
Nos. 35, 37  
(you) tell, ? come

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Vietnamese is spoken in Vietnam, and is a member of the Vietnamuong language family.