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MULTIPLE CONSTRUCTIONS THROUGH WORD ORDER TRANSPOSITION

by Jay Flippinger

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. Nguyễn 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 functive 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.

(Definitions abstracted from Hoa's Vietnamese-English Dictionary, Tokyo (1966).

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?

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8. Nó đến không bảo sao?	He came but didn't tell you, eh?
9. Nó đến bảo sao không?"	He came and said, "Why not? "
10. Nó đến bảo "không sao."	He came and said, "Never mind."
11. Nó đến, sao không bảo?	He came - why didn't you tell him?
He came - why didn't he tell you ?
12. Nó bảo sao không đến?"	He said, "Why didn't you come? "
13. Nó bảo "không đến sao?"	He said, "You didn't come, eh?"
14. Nó bảo "đến không sao."	He said, "come ahead."
15. Nó không bảo "sao đến?"	He didn't say "Why did you come?"
16. Nó không bảo đến sao?	He didn't say he would come, eh?
He didn't say for you to come, eh?
17. Nó 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 "đến không sao."	Tell him, "come ahead."
23. Bảo "sao nó không đến?"	Say, "Why didn't he come?"
24. Bảo sao? Nó đến không ?	What did you say? Did he come?
25. Bảo "không sao, nó đến."	Tell him, "Never mind, he came."
26. Không bảo sao nó đến?	You didn't say, "Why did he come?"
27. Không bảo nó đến sao?	You didn't tell him to come, eh?
28. Không đến bảo nó sao?	You didn't come and tell him, eh?
29. Không đến. Nó bảo sao?	He didn't come. What did he say?
You didn't come. So what did he say?
30. Không sao, bảo nó đến.	Never mind. Tell him to come.
31. Đến bảo nó không 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?

34. Đến không? Nó bảo sao?

Did he come? What did he say?
Did you come? What did he say?

35. Đến, sao không bảo nó?

He came - why didn't you tell him?
You came - why didn't you tell him?

36. Đến, sao nó không bảo?

He came - why didn't he tell you?
You came - why didn't he tell you?

37. Đến, sao bảo nó không?

You came - why did you tell him not to?
He came - why did you tell him not to?

38. Đến, nó bảo không sao."

He came, and he said, "Never mind."
You came, and he said, "Never mind."

39. Đến, nó không bảo sao?

You came but he didn't tell you, eh?
He came but he didn't tell you, 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 Vietnamluong
language family.