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 function particles. They are:

- **nó** (arrogant) 3rd person pronoun.
- **bào** to say (to).
- **đến** to come.
- **không** not; (as final particle) or not?
- **sao** 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? Bào 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. Nồ đên không báo sao?
He came but didn’t tell you, eh?
9. Nồ đên báo sao không?"
He came and said, "Why not?"
10. Nồ đên báo "không sao."
He came and said, "Never mind."
11. Nồ đên, sao không báo?
He came – why didn’t you tell him?
12. Nồ báo sao không đến?
He came – why didn’t he tell you?
13. Nồ báo "không đến sao?"
He said, "Why didn’t you come?"
He said, "You didn’t come, eh?"
15. Nồ không báo "sao đến?"
He didn’t say "Why did you come?"
16. Nồ không báo đến sao?
He didn’t say he would come, eh?
17. Nồ không đến báo sao?
He didn’t say for you to come, eh?
18. Báo nó "sao không đến?"
He didn’t come and tell you, eh?
19. Báo nó "không đến sao?"
Say to him, "Why didn’t you come?"
20. Báo nó đến, sao không?
Say to him, "you didn’t come, eh?"
21. Báo nó, "đến sao không?"
Why not tell him to come?
22. Báo nó "đến không sao."
Say, "Why didn’t he come?"
23. Báo "sao nó không đến?"
What did you say? Did he come?
24. Báo sao? Nồ đên không?
Tell him, "Never mind, he came."
25. Báo "không sao, nó đên."
You didn’t say, "Why did he come?"
26. Không báo sao nó đên?
You didn’t tell him to come, eh?
27. Không báo nó đên sao?
You didn’t come and tell him, eh?
28. Không đên báo nó sao?
He didn’t come. What did he say?
29. Không đên. Nó báo sao?
You didn’t come. So what did he say?
Never mind. Tell him to come.
You came and told him, "Never mind."
32. Bên báo nó "sao không?"
You came and told him, "Why not?"
33. Bên không báo 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.)

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

The following are structurally ambiguous:

No. II
Nos. 16,29,34,36,38,39
   he come,? tell
Nos. 35,37
   he tell,? come
   (you) tell,? come

Jay Fippinger
227 Van Houten Avenue
Wyckoff, New Jersey 07481

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