The syntax of PPs and the SOVX word order of Mande

Mande languages are characterized by the SOVX word order pattern: objects precede the verb but all other arguments and adjuncts follow it. This pattern is illustrated in (1) by an example from Wan (Southeastern Mande), where the verb selects for an object and an oblique argument, expressed as a postpositional phrase; the two arguments appear on the opposite sides of the verb.

(1)	S	O	V	[PP		]
	è	*klɛ̃́nɛ̃̀*	*tálā*	*bɔ̀lè*	*mù*	*klā*
	s/he	stone	threw	bird	PL	behind/after

'He threw stones at birds.'

In the study of word order typology, the SOVX word order pattern is viewed as rare or perhaps exceptional, and is often explained as a historical quirk (e.g., Givón (1975, 1979) treats Mande languages as languages "in transition" from SOV to SVO). Another explanation is suggested by Koopman (1984: 126-8) for Mahou (Central Mande) and is intended to account for the syntax of Mande languages in general (Koopman 1984: 127; Travis 1989 for Kpelle). On this analysis, verbs are assumed to assign their theta-role to the right but Case to the left, i.e. both object NPs and PP arguments are generated in the post-verbal position, but object NPs move into the preverbal position in order to be assigned Case.

In this paper, I argue against the movement-based explanation based on a more detailed analysis of the syntax of embedded clauses in Wan. I show that in Wan, PPs invariably follow the main verb, independently of the position of the embedded verb that selects for them, suggesting that postpositional arguments do not form a constituent with their verb and are instead adjoined to the IP. This evidence is problematic for movement-based accounts that presuppose that arguments originate next to the verb that subcategorizes for them. I discuss general implications of the SOVX syntax of Mande for the syntactic theory and suggest how this unusual word order pattern developed historically.