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GERMAN WORD ORDER

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Abstract: *The idea that German word order is governed by more than one principle can be found in the works of the linguists where two types of languages are distinguished. In the first type the verb is modified by preceding, in the second one by succeeding, elements (structures XV and VX respectively). German is on the way from the XV to the VX type. Thus, the existence of not only various, but even contradictory principles have to be assumed for German word order.*

Key words: *communicative dynamism, functional sentence perspective, thema/ rhema, initial/ central/ final - position.*

1. Introduction

Sentence patterns, although forming the basis of all sentences, are no more than a theoretical construct which can be modified in many ways. For example, a particular sentence pattern makes no statement about the word order found in a sentence based on it. This article tries to shade some light upon one of the bugbears of many learners of German: German WORD ORDER. Apart from daunting qualities it may posses, a German sentence based, for example, on Engel's pattern 013 (subject, accusative object, dative object) can have many confusing variants:

[1]*a* Der Boss hat dem Gangster das Geld gestern Abend gegeben.

[1]*b* Der Boss hat dem Gangster gestern Abend das Geld gegeben.

[1]*c* Der Boss hat das Geld dem Gangster gestern Abend gegeben.

[1]*d* Der Boss hat das Geld gestern Abend dem Gangster gegeben.

[1]*e* Der Boss hat gestern Abend dem Gangster das Geld gegeben.

[1]*f* Der Boss hat gestern Abend das Geld dem Gangster gegeben.

Similar sets of six (in cases [2-4]) and of twenty-four variants (in case [5] all four elements right of *hat* can change places) are possible, if *dem Gangster*, *das Geld*, *gestern Abend* or *gegeben* change places with *der Boss*:

[2]*a* Dem Gangster hat der Boss das Geld gestern Abend gegeben.

[2]*b* Dem Gangster hat der Boss gestern Abend das Geld gegeben. etc

[3]*a* Das Geld hat der Boss dem Gangster gestern Abend gegeben. etc

[4]*a* Gestern Abend hat der Boss dem Gangster das Geld gegeben. etc

[5]*a* Gegeben hat der Boss dem Gangster das Geld gestern Abend. etc

All in all, there are 48 possible variants, most of which would be considered 'good German' or, at least, acceptable, some, however, only under very particular conditions.

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Stress is one of these conditions. A fairly neural variant of sentences [1*a*-5*x*], for example [1*b*] would, like most German sentences, contain one element marked by stress as prominent (indicated by *1* above the relevant word or syllable) and elements marked as less important by lesser degrees of emphasis (*2*, *3*, *4*, etc). Sentence [1*b*] could be represented as follows (Kiparsky, 1966 ; Bierwisch, 1966):

[1]*b* Der Boss hat dem Gangster gestern Abend das GELD gegeben.

Some variants of [1*a*-5*x*] are, at least as isolated sentences outside a given context, only possible if the stress pattern is also different from normal. For example

[5]*b* GEGEBEN hat der Boss dem Gangster das Geld gestern ABEND.

in which case the sentence would probably or, at least, could be continued by

[6] VERSPROCHEN hatte er es ihm schon LANGE.

The word order as given in [5*b*], supported by the appropriate stress, is possible if *gegeben/gestern Abend* are– explicitly or implicitly–contrasted with other elements.

[5*b*] would also be possible with emphatic stress on *gegeben* only, with a general reduction of all other stresses, if it is, for example, used as a correction of [7]. In this case it is, however, likely that *Boss*, *Gangster*, and *Geld* appear in a pronominalized form [8]. *Gestern Abend* may be left out altogether.

[7] Der Boss hat dem Gangster das Geld also gestern Abend weggenommen?

[8] Nein, GÉGEBEN hat er es ihm!

implying 'not taken away, but given' (Fuchs, *Akzent*, 1976: 293-312).

It is not always easy to decide whether sentences such as [8] follow the emphatic stress pattern or simply have their normal intonation centre in initial position.

Besides the variants which mostly occur with contrastive or emphatic stress a large number of variants remain, variants without particular stress conditions, but with varying order. The question is whether these variants are freely exchangeable or, if not, what differences there are between them, and, further, by what conditions the position of an element in a sentence is determined. First of all, however, a firm point of departure is searched for in the further considerations of word order.

2. Firm and Unfirm Elements in German Word Order

An unbiased reading of the first section of this article might lead to the idea that anything is possible in German word order but to the distress of very foreign learner of German this is not so. A careful reading will have observed the element that remained consistent in sentences [1-5]. It is the finite part of the verbal group: *hat*.

For the position of *hat* only two changes can be imagined. The first would result in a remarkable change in the communicative function of the sentence: sentence [9] would be interpreted as a question, a change of intonation presupposed (falling intonation in [1-8], rising in [9]).

[9] Hat der Boss dem Gangster gestern Abend das Geld gegeben?

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The second is only possible under very particular conditions, *ie* if a conjunction is added at the beginning, and the sentence is integrated as a clause into a complex structure:

[10] Es steht fest, DASS der Boss dem Gangster gestern Abend das Geld gegeben hat.

In the affirmative proposition, however, the finite part of the verb retains its position as in sentences [1-5]. If there is a non-finite part of the verb, it normally assumes the final position, allowing few elements to follow. Initial position as in [5] depends on contextual conditions, or on particular stress conditions. Thus, a scheme of word order in the affirmative sentences can be drawn up for showing the frame-constituting function of the verb (Drach, *Grundgedanken*, 1940). The bracketed V_{infin} and final position are not present in all sentences:

Initial position	V_{fin}	*Central position*	(V_{infin})	(*Final position*)
[11]*a*		dem Gangster das		als
Der Boss	gab	Geld heute früher	heraus	gestern.
[11]*b*		dem Gangster das		als
Der Boss	hat	Geld heute früher	gegeben	gestern.
[11]*c*		dem Gangster das		als
Der Boss	will	Geld heute früher	geben	gestern.
[11]*d*		dem Gangster das		als
Der Boss	gab	Geld heute früher		gestern.

The final position can be dealt with in brief, for although it is open to all sorts of elements-especially in the spoken language- the types of elements for which final position is the normal one are very restricted. They usually have corresponding elements in the rest of the sentence (given in brackets), and carry their own intonation centre (Beneš, *Ausklammerung*, 1968: 294-295):

(i) subordinate clauses (head in the main clause)

(ii) infinitive with zu depending on verb (verb)

(iii) enumeration (:)

(iv) second component of comparisons with als or wie (first component, see sentences [11a-b])

(v) apposition (head noun)

(vi) parenthesis with und zwar (whole sentence)

(vii) second and further components of a multi-componential expression, copulative or adversative (first component)

(viii) elliptic clause corresponding to the first part of the sentence

Apart from these cases it is mainly for stylistic reasons that elements are shifted to the final position, eg to avoid a weak non-finite component of the verb, which might appear separated from its corresponding finite component by too complex noun phrases (Duden, *Grammatik*, 1973: 625):

[12] Ich drang EIN in die Musik, in die Architektur der Fugen, indie verschlungenen Labyrinthe der Symfonien, in die harten Gefüge des Jazz (Weiss).

Similarly, the initial position can be described briefly for the time being. It contains, at least in neutral written German, a single noun phrase or adverbial phrase, which is sometimes preceded by a conjunction. Thus, it is the central position that contains the bulk of the actants and circonstants.

3. Functional Sentence Perspective

The concept which has proved most useful in the description of German word order has become known under the name of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP). Its principal idea is that information is not

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transmitted in random order, but that the speaker seeks to give his information to his interlocutor in portions, normally starting from what he assumes is common to both (the THEME, topic) and proceeding to what he regards as important new information (the RHEME, comment).

Let us consider the following sentences:

[13] Was gab der Boss dem Gangster?

[14] Der Boss gab dem Gangster das Geld.

[15] Wem gab der Boss das Geld?

[16] Der Boss gab das Geld dem Gangster.

It is significant that the most important items of information-*Geld* in [14], *Gangster* in [16], their importance is evident from the questions – take up the final positions in [14] and [16]. In fact, [16] would not be a suitable answer to [13], and neither would [14] to [15], at least if we ignore stress variation for the time being. As it appears, the difference in word order of [14] and [16] reflects a difference in the "extent to which a sentence element contributes to the development of the communication" (Firbas, *Defining the theme*, 1964: 270), a difference in what Firbas called the COMMUNICATIVE DYNAMISM (CD) of the respective elements.

This function of word order becomes still clearer if these sentences are matched with equivalent English sentences:

[17] The boss gave the gangster the money.

[18] *? The boss gave the money the gangster.

[19] The boss gave the money to the gangster.

Sentence [18] is odd not because there is, in English, no need to emphasize *the gangster* - this is expressed in [19] - but because this position signals a different syntactic relationship between the elements of the sentence, which in turn is not compatible with this view of the word. The German translation, which is equally odd, will make this clear:

[20] *? Der Boss gab dem Geld den Gangster.

From these and other examples two conclusions can be drawn:

(i) Firstly, indicating different degrees of CD is not the only function of word order. In English, the main function of word order is to signify syntactic relationship. In German, where this function is carried out mainly by inflexional cases, word order can be used to express differences in CD of the sentence elements – at least as far as the central and initial position elements are concerned.

(ii) Secondly, as sentence [19] shows, word order is not the only way of indicating CD. Besides word order syntactic constructions [19], particles (*eg* focusing adjuncts: *eben, sogar; nur; gerade*) and especially phonetic devices (*eg* prominent stress on the element with the highest CD) play an important role, notably in languages which, for syntactic reasons, demonstrate little flexibility with regard to word order.

In German, whose word order is more flexible than English, but still less flexible than Romanian, all possible ways of indicating CD are used. Usually they cooperate: in [14] and [16] stress and position assign the highest CD to *Geld* and *Gangster* respectively.

[14] Der Boss gab dem Gangster das GÉLD.

[16] Der Boss gab das Geld dem GÁNGSTER.

But in the case of the verb stress must suffice, the verbal position being fixed:

[21] Der Boss GÁB dem Gangster das GÉLD.

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Sometimes, in case the different means (stress, position) conflict, stress overrides word order.

[22] Der Boss gab dem GÁNGSTER das Geld.

As a rule of thumb one can say that the closer the prominent stress moves to the front, and thus away from the position marked as prominent by word order (final, or at least near the end), the more likely it is that the element bears some emotional emphasis and/or is contrasted.

Even though other means of indicating the CD of a sentence element do exist, the close connection between word order and FSP should require some further attention. Being marked as the intonation centre of the sentence, the element with the highest CD – the *rheme* proper in Firbas's term - is particularly easy to distinguish (Firbas, *Defining the theme*, 1964: 268). Assuming that each element of the sentence carries its particular load of CD, and that the elements can be ordered as *theme proper*, *theme*, *transition*, *rheme* and *rheme proper* on the basis of increasing CD, the interest moves on how can the CD of a sentence element be determined and how can degrees of CD be measured. Firbas manages to show that the CD is influenced by the interplay of various factors (Firbas, *Thoughts*, 1959: 42-44):

(i) The BASIC DISTRIBUTION OF CD, which Firbas sees as a continuous rise from the theme proper (lowest CD) at the beginning of a sentence to the rheme proper (highest CD) at the end, if unhampered by other word order principles.

(ii) The CONTEXT (verbal and situational): elements expressing notions *that are known or may be gathered from the context* are relatively low CD, new elements of relatively high CD.

(iii) SEMANTIC-CONTEXTUAL FACTORS closely related to the last point: deictic elements (*eg* personal pronouns), the use of which is only possible in unambiguous contexts, tend to have low CD. Similarly, the definite article has – according to Firbas – a dedynamizing effect, the indefinite article a dynamizing one.

As a further semantic-syntactic factor one could add the distinction (obligatory) actants and circonstants, which seems to be the basis of the different influence exerted by different verb classes (Firbas, *Thoughts*, 1959: 41-42). Despite many convincing analyses along these lines, Firbas's analysis of sentence elements as theme, transition, etc is still based on (his) linguistic intuition. Attempts to make his analysis susceptible to objective verification, for example by developing question tests, have not, so far, been entirely successful (Chomsky, *Deep Structure*, 1972: 89-103). In longer sentences especially, it is difficult to establish clear boundaries between theme and rheme. Nevertheless, the influence of the distribution of CD must not be ignored in studies of word order.

4. FSP and the Position of Accusative and Dative Object

As seen in the previous section, due to the inability to measure CD on the basis of testable criteria, it is difficult to assign degrees of CD indisputably, especially in longer sentences. Lenerz (*Abfolge*, 1977) manages to show, restricting himself to the study of elements in immediate sequence, the importance of the CD load for the position of the elements in question, at the same time demonstrating the influence of other factors: definiteness, the sentence frame, and the relative length of the elements.

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The first problem in determining the sequence rules of dative (E_3) and accusative (E_1) object is whether the sequences E_3E_1 and E_1E_3 are both equally possible or whether one of them is basic/*unmarked*, *ie* possible under all conditions, and the other marked, *ie* possible only under certain conditions. For this purpose, sentences similar to [13-14] are used to test whether all variants are possible:

[13] Was gab der Boss dem Gangster?

[14] Der Boss gab dem Gangster das GÉLD.

[23] *Der Boss gab das GÉLD dem Gangster.

[15] Wem gab der Boss das Geld?

[16] Der Boss gab das Geld dem GÁNGSTER.

[24] Der Boss gab dem GÁNGSTER das Geld.

The rheme element is indicated by ′. Whereas sequence E_3E_1, both for CD distribution lower/higher [14] and higher/lower [24], the sequence E_1E_3 is possible only if the CD distribution is lower/higher [16], or equally high, for example in contrast [25]:

[25] Der Boss gab das GÉLD dem GÁNGSTER und der SCHMÚCK seiner FRÁU.

Consequently, E_3E_1 is the unmarked – normal sequence (Lenerz, *Abfolge,* 1977: 43).

So far, these results are in agreement with those of the traditional CD analysis, which, however, was founded on the basic distribution of CD, which – according to Beneš (*Thema-Rhema-Gliederung*, 1973: 45) – can be found in sentences in which no element is contextually bound (made clear by the indefinite articles and present tense):

[26] Ein Boss gibt einem Gangster Geld.

A further criterion, however, modifies the traditional view of some FSP linguists that indefinite articles have a dynamizing effect, and should, consequently follow the dedynamizing definite articles (Boost, *Untersuchungen*, 1955: 52). It can easily be shown that the sequence indefinite-definite is possible [14*a*, 24*a*]. Although it is true that the distinction between definite and indefinite article has an influence on word order, the conditions are more complicated, as examples [14-16*c*] show:

$E_3É_1$

[14] Der Boss gab dem Gangster das GÉLD.

[14]*a* Der Boss gab einem Gangster das GÉLD.

[14]*b* Der Boss gab dem Gangster GÉLD.

[14]*c* Der Boss gab einem Gangster GÉLD.

$É_3E_1$

[24] Der Boss gab dem GÁNGSTER das Geld.

[24]*a* Der Boss gab einem GÁNGSTER das Geld.

[24]*b* Der Boss gab dem GÁNGSTER Geld.

[24]*c* Der Boss gab einem GÁNGSTER Geld.

$E_1É_3$

[16] Der Boss gab das Geld dem GÁNGSTER.

[16]*a* Der Boss gab Geld dem GÁNGSTER.

[16]*b* Der Boss gab das Geld einem GÁNGSTER.

[16]*c* *Der Boss gab Geld einem GÁNGSTER.

The sequence $É_1E_3$ can be left out of consideration as it has already been found to be unacceptable on the grounds of CD distribution. It can be seen that again the marked variant $E_1É_3$ is affected by restrictions.

On the basis of these investigations it is possible to formulate the following rules for the sequence of E_3 and E_1 (Lenerz, *Abfolge,* 1977: 45, 55, 63):

(i) sequence E_1E_3 is impossible if E_1 has a higher CD than E_3.

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(ii) sequence E_1E_3 is impossible if E_1 is an indefinite noun phrase.

Two more rules are more of stylistic nature:

(iii) There is a stylistic tendency to place the more complex element (*ie* the one containing relatively more words) after the less complex.

(iv) There is a stylistic tendency to avoid – in sentences without a verb frame– *weightless* endings ([27*a*-27*b*]).

For this reason [27] is considered better than [27*a*].

[27] Der Boss gab das Geld dem Gangster, den er seit Jahren kannte und schätzte.

[27]*a* Der Boss gab dem Gangster, den er seit Jahren kannte und schätzte, das Geld.

If, however, the final $É_1$ in [27a] is supported by the non-finite part of the verb, as in [27*b*], final position is acceptable:

[27]*b* Der Boss hat dem Gangster, den er seit Jahren kannte und schätzte, das Geld gegeben.

The rules of German word order can – notwithstanding the rules of CD distribution – possibly not be reduced to a single principle. The set of factors would have become more complicated if including the position of pronouns in investigation. As Engel (*Syntax*, 1977: 191) remarks, it is not enough to define word order rules on the basis of sentence elements (objects, adverbial clauses, etc), one has to take their different realizations into account (noun phrases, pronouns, etc).

Apart from this, knowing the conditions governing sequences in which neither element is the rheme proper of the sentence is another important problem to be investigated.

5. FSP: The Initial Position

Even if the view that only one element can precede the finite verb must be modified (Betz, *Überprüfung*, 1973: 242-267), here sequence problems are not as important as in the central position. Neither is it very difficult to decide which elements may occur in initial position: according to Engel most elements occurring in the central position are possible in initial position as well. Therefore discussion has been concentrated on the role the initial position plays in FSP, and on the factors that determine how it is filled. There is general agreement that the element preceding V_{fin} can be part of the rheme (as rheme proper marked by the intonation centre of the sentence), in which case the sentence is marked as expressive and/or emotional, or thematic, the normal, unmarked case.

The thematic status of the initial position has caused considerable confusion, because some linguists (for example Boost, 1955: 26-31) have suggested that the status of theme should be assigned to the element in initial position in all cases. However, if thematic/rhematic are defined as carrying lower/higher CD, the theme (Firbas's *rheme proper*) having the highest CD, it can be shown that the first element in a sentence is not necessarily the theme:

[28] Die Zahl der Arbeitslosen ist seit 1970 in allen Ländern Europas gestiegen. In Deutschland lag sie im August 1977 bei 900,000.

In Deutschland, as specification of *Länder Europas*, carries more information than *sie*, which merely takes up *die Zahl der Arbeitslosen*. In FSP, it has therefore been found useful to distinguish between *theme proper* (the element with the lowest CD) and *basis* (the part of the theme in initial position, not necessarily the theme

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proper). The choice of basis is mainly determined by the linguistic and/or situational context. The thematic elements can occur freely in initial position without giving special expressive value to the sentence. Which of the thematic elements is finally chosen depends not so much on the CD structure within the theme, but on the prominence an element has in the speaker's mind at the moment at which he starts his sentence. This is, as a rule, an element of the closer context; in German, its syntactic function hardly plays any role. German word order cannot be explained only by CD distribution. When it comes to filling the initial position, contextual factors play a particularly important role.

The detailed investigation of the interrelationship of word order and context is another task for the future.

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