

Word order differences and their implications

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German and English vary considerably as regards word order. These differences result in many mistakes when translating from one language into the other. In addition, some constructions that are quite common in German are ungrammatical in English because of syntactic restrictions.

declarative main clauses:

German	English
(1) <u>Van Gogh</u> <u>malte</u> das Bild „Sonnenblumen“.	<u>Van Gogh</u> <u>painting</u> the picture “Sunflowers”.
(2) <u>Johann</u> <u>hat</u> gerade ein Bild gemalt, als...	<u>John</u> <u>was</u> painting a picture when...
(3) <u>Peter</u> <u>ißt</u> oft Schokolade.	<u>Peter</u> often <u>eats</u> chocolate.
(4) Diesen Minister <u>hat</u> <u>die Presse</u> schon lange kritisiert.	This minister <u>the press</u> <u>has</u> been criticising for a long time.
(5) Gestern <u>feierte</u> <u>die Mannschaft</u> ihren Sieg.	Yesterday <u>the team</u> <u>celebrated</u> their victory.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ finite verb always shows up in second position (i.e. only one constituent can precede the finite verb) ⇒ any constituent (subject, object, adverb,...) can occupy the sentence-initial position ➔ Verb Second (V2) language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ subject always precedes the finite verb ⇒ the lexical verb and the object have to be adjacent ⇒ if a constituent other than the subject occupies the sentence-initial position, both this constituent and the subject precede the finite verb ➔ SVO language

embedded clauses:

German	English
(6) ... daß <u>van Gogh</u> das Bild „Sonnenblumen“ <u>malte</u> that <u>van Gogh</u> <u>painte</u> d the picture “Sunflowers”.
(7) ... daß <u>Johann</u> gerade ein Bild gemalt <u>hat</u> , als...	...that <u>John</u> <u>was</u> painting a picture when...
(8) ... daß <u>Peter</u> oft Schokolade <u>ißt</u> that <u>Peter</u> often <u>eats</u> chocolate.
(9) ... daß diesen Minister <u>die Presse</u> schon lange kritisiert <u>hat</u> that <u>the press</u> <u>has</u> been criticising this minister for a long time.
(10) ... daß gestern <u>die Mannschaft</u> ihren Sieg <u>feierte</u> that <u>the team</u> <u>celebrated</u> their victory yesterday.
⇒ the finite verb (the verbal complex) always shows up clause-finally → OV word order	⇒ same word order as in main clauses → SVO word order

☞ **Why do German learners of English often make mistakes concerning word order?**

☞ **How can these mistakes be avoided?**

By means of theoretical linguistics we can explain the differences between the two languages. Word order differences, for example, can easily be accounted for if we assume that the universal clausal architecture comprises three areas which the individual languages activate to a varying degree.

These areas are:

- i) the LEXICAL DOMAIN in which the verb is associated with its arguments [this domain is not of interest here]
- ii) the AGREEMENT DOMAIN in which, e.g., subjects are associated with Nominative Case
- iii) the DISCOURSE-RELATED DOMAIN which is relevant for determining topic, focus, clause-type and in addition, finiteness. (When looking at clauses in their linear order the discourse-related domain is to the left of the agreement domain.)

In each language either **the agreement domain or the discourse-related domain** has to **obligatorily be realised**.

⇒ In English, it is the **agreement domain** that has to obligatorily be realised. One of the most important characteristics of the agreement domain is the association with **Nominative Case**. Hence the **subject** is the most prominent element of the English clause.

The discourse-related domain is only activated if it is absolutely needed for a topic or a focussed element. Usually this extra domain is simply “attached to the left side” of the basic clause (exception: sentences like *Under no circumstances will he give in.*).

⇒ In German, on the other hand, the **discourse-related domain** has to obligatorily be realised. In this domain, Case does not play a role. Instead, **discourse links** and **clause-typing** play a crucial role. Therefore any kind of constituent can target this domain, the choice depending solely on discourse requirements.

As the discourse-related domain is also sensitive to **finiteness** the finite verb, too, targets this domain in main clauses, hence we get V2. In embedded clauses, on the other hand, the complementiser (*daß, um,...*) is marked for (non-)finiteness and therefore realises the discourse-related domain on its own, i.e. no phrase nor the finite verb is needed there.

These characteristics also allow us to explain why certain constructions found in German have no immediate equivalent in English.

special constructions:

German	English
(11) Es hat soeben der Kanzler die Bühne betreten.	The chancellor has just mounted the platform. or: In this moment, the chancellor has mounted the platform.
(12) Mich friert.	I feel cold.

⇒ (11) **Thetic construction**: such a sentence can be uttered out-of-the-blue and therefore must not depend on context. Therefore no constituent can be used to establish a discourse link and hence we need an expletive element, *es*, to neutrally realise the discourse-related domain.

In English, we either choose the default word order or choose a relatively neutral temporal or locative adverbial as a topic.

⇒ (12) **Impersonal psych-verb construction**: As the discourse-related domain is not sensitive to Case, a Dative or Accusative experiencer can realise this domain.

In English, on the other hand, the functional domain has to be realised by a Nominative element, hence the experiencer has to be Nominative.

Conclusion:

If German learners of English are aware of the fact that the structural make-up of an English sentence is different from that of a German one and especially, if they know the way in which the two languages differ, they will be less prone to make mistakes than when they just learn rules about adverb placement, for example.