German Word Order: Form and Meaning

Main Clauses - overall structure of German assertions

The structure of the following sentence exemplifies the structure of all assertions in German. (All sample sentences in this handout are based on the drama *Besuch der alten Dame* by Dürrenmatt.)

Heute kommt Kläri nach so vielen Jahren zurück.

This structure can be represented grammatically by the following schematic diagram:

Front Field	Sentence Field			End Field
	Inflected Verb	Inner Field	Verb Complement	
Heute	**kommt**	**Kläri nach**	**so vielen Jahren zurück.**	
Die Leute	**sind**	**jetzt**	**arm**	**hier in Güllen.**
Theme	*Transition*		*Rheme*	

The meaning behind this structure is a pragmatic one. Roughly speaking, a German sentence starts with the *theme*, elements that you as listener already know, that have been already identified in the text or situation. The sentence then gives details that you don't already know or new information, the *rheme.* In the sample sentences above the main news or *rheme* is expressed by the verbal complement: the fact of Kläri's return (=zurück), the poverty of the Gülleners (=arm).

What constitutes the heart of the assertion (=rheme) depends on the intentions of the speaker, indicated by intonation and word order within the inner field. The actual partition of the sentence thus varies with the intentions of the speaker. Theme and rheme combined form the *Topic* of the assertion.

The Front Field

1.   The main function of the front field is to establish the theme of the sentence, that is, the spatial, temporal or personal frame within which the assertion holds ("Speaking of..."). Thus, if someone tells you:

   Die Güllener erwarten viel Geld von der Milliardärin.
you might reply:

   Eine Milliardärin will aber meistens etwas für ihr Geld.

The reply would mean: "Speaking of millionairesses, the fact is, that they usually want something in return for their money".

If you replied:

   Für ihr Geld will aber eine Milliardärin meistens etwas Bestimmtes.

the reply would mean: "Speaking of the generosity of millionairesses, I can tell you that they usually want something in return."

And if you replied:

>*Meistens* will aber eine Milliardärin etwas für ihr Geld.

the meaning would be: "Speaking in terms of statistics, I can tell you that usually, a millionairess wants something in return for her money."

In German, it is the THEME that sets the tone of the assertion, whereas in English it is the grammatical subject. In German, even if the grammatical subject is of high news value, it usually falls after the verb.

2.   A sentence can have <u>o</u>nly one theme. Thus, the front field can be occupied by only one syntactical unit, such as the subject, or a time phrase, or a logical connector, or a whole dependent clause, but not by two or three.

>*Kläri* kommt heute zurück nach so vielen Jahren.
>*Heute* kommt Kläri zurück.
>*Nach so vielen Jahren* kommt Kläri zurück.
>*Darum* kommt Kläri heute zurück, weil sie Ills Leben will.
>*Weil sie Ills Leben will*, kommt Kläri heute zurück.

but not: "Kläri nach so vielen Jahren kommt heute zurück."
This last sentence is disturbing to a German ear, because one doesn't know what you are talking about: Kläri or the time frame.

3.   Sentence adverbs, such as "leider, Gott sei Dank, also..." set the tone or attitude of the speaker toward the content of the whole assertion. Thus, if a sentence adverb stands in the front field, nothing else can occupy the front field. Note that since the theme is part of the sentence it is never separated from the verb by a comma (unlike English).

>*Gott sei Dank* kommt bald die Dame.
>*Natürlich* kauft sie alles, was sie will.
>Die Güllener sind arm; *also* hoffen sie sehr auf das Geld.

4.   Once the theme is stated, the verb always comes next as the second syntactic unit, even if the grammatical subject has not been named yet (unlike English). The inflected verb in the main clause is thus always the second syntactical unit. There are no exceptions. The following sentence is not possible in German: "Heute, sie kommt zurück."

The End Field

Most German sentences end with the rheme and have, therefore, no end field. The end field is frequently used for additional specifications or amplifications, presented as an afterthought. End field constructions are more often used in spoken, colloquial speech.

>Ill und Kläri sind auseinandergegangen *damals*.
>Mein Gott, wenn nur alles nur klappt *zur rechten Zeit*!

Elements introduced by the particles **als** and **wie** are <u>a</u>lways put in the end field.

> Ich werde natürlich nicht hemdärmlig dastehen *wie jetzt.*
> Die Lage der Güllener ist nie so schlimm gewesen *wie am*
> *Anfang des Stückes.*
> Ich weiß, daß niemand reicher ist *als die alte Dame.*

The Sentence Field: Inflected Verb and Verbal Complements

1.   The inflected verb is the first part of the predicate and the verbal complement is the second part of the predicate. The inflected verb forms a transition between the theme and the specific news contained in the rest of the sentence field (rheme). Since most German sentences do not use the end field, the verbal complement is the last element of the sentence. It is the most important part of the predicate, the one that gives the sentence its specific meaning.

	Transition		*Verbal complement*
Die alte Dame	kommt	mit dem Zug	nach Güllen zurück.

2.   The verbal complement gives the inflected verb its specific meaning and is the main carrier of the news value contained in the assertion. For instance, verbs like **kommen, steigen, fahren, sein** indicate only general motions or states. They acquire a specific direction of meaning through the verbal complement: **an, Rad, ab, arm**.

a.   Separable Prefixes, such as **ab** in **abfahren** belong to the verbal complement:

> abfahren   Der Zug fährt mit der Presse wieder *ab.*
> radfahren   Die Dame fährt nicht mehr *Rad.*
> einsteigen   Die Passagiere steigen in den Zug *ein.*

b.   Directives, i.e., expressions indicating the place where a motion originates or ends belong to the verbal complement:

> Morgen kommt eine reiche Dame *nach Güllen.*
> Der Zug kommt gewöhnlich *aus Kalberstadt.*
> Ill ging damals oft mit seiner Familie *ins Kino.*

c.   Predicate adjectives and predicate nouns, i.e., adjectives or nouns related to the subject by the verbs **sein**, **werden**, **bleiben** (not direct objects of the verb in the accusative case) are predicate elements.

> Güllen wird plötzlich *reich.*
> Gott sei Dank ist Ill *der Jugendfreund.*

d.   Prepositional Objects. Some verbs must be constructed with a preposition for their meaning to be complete; for example, **sich erinnern an** (+ Akkusativ), **reagieren auf** (+ Akkusativ). The prepositional phrase belongs to the verbal complement.

> Wir erinnern uns heute alle *an Kläri Wäscher.*
> Wie reagieren Sie denn jetzt *auf die Bedingung?*

3.   Placement of **nicht** (also: **nie**, **nicht mehr**, **noch nicht**): **nicht** can negate either the rheme or the theme.

a.   **Nicht** gives a negative meaning to the new information or rheme by preceding that element in the sentence field which the speaker considers to be the most important. The position of **nicht** indicates what the speaker considers to be the rheme.

Theme	Transition	Rheme
Die Züge	halten sehr oft	nicht in Güllen.

Elements preceding **nicht** are not included in the negation. Thus, the rheme is here: (stopping) -*in-Güllen*, and *sehr oft* tells us that the *non*-(stopping)-*in-Güllen* happens very often. However, it is up to the speaker to indicate where the rheme begins. The segmentation could also be as follows:

Theme	Transition	Rheme
Die Züge	halten	nicht sehr oft in Güllen.

Now *sehr oft* is included in the negation and the rheme is: *non-frequent*-(stops)-*in Güllen*.
If **nicht** is to negate the whole verb, it stands directly in front of the verbal complement, since it carries the greatest news value.

Die Presse	steigt in Güllen	noch nicht aus.
Claire Z.	fährt jetzt	nicht mehr Auto.
Ill	geht sonntags	nie ins Kino.
Der Zug	kommt	nicht aus Kalberstadt.
Leider	ist Ill heute	nicht mehr ihr Jugendfreund.
Güllen	ist plötzlich	nicht mehr arm.
Wir	erinnern uns	nicht mehr an Herrn Wäscher.

b.   **Nicht** can give a negative flavor to the old information (theme + transition). In this case it becomes the rheme itself. Thus, if the sentence does not contain a verbal complement, **nicht** stands at the very end of the sentence.

Heute	kommt Claire Z.	nicht.
Der Zugführer	will das Geld	nicht.
Ich	erwarte ihn heute	nicht.
Wir	haben kein Brot	mehr.

This structure is particularly apparent in the abbreviated forms where only theme and rheme remain: "Heute nicht!", "Ich nicht."

The Sentence Field: Inner Field

The principle of *increasing news value* applies to word order in the inner field.

1.   Position of the Subject

If a pronoun such as **er**, **sie** or **wir** stands in the inner field, it follows the verb immediately.

   Gestern hat *er* es ihm gesagt.

Since nouns generally have more news value than pronouns (which refer to something mentioned before, i.e., old information), noun subjects in the inner field are usually preceded by pronoun objects.

   (Gestern war Kläri arm.) Heute gehört ihr *die Welt*.

If the pronoun is to be especially stressed, then it may follow the noun.

   (Die Milliadärin denkt groß.) Heute gehört *die Welt* i̱hr und nicht Gott.

2.   Accusative pronouns

Accusative personal pronouns always precede dative personal pronouns.

   Warum will er *es ihm* nicht sagen?

   (Warum ist ausgerechnet Güllen so arm?)
   Leider kann ich *es Ihnen* nicht erklären.

   (Ill wird der nächste Bürgermeister sein.)
   Man hat *es ihm* versprochen.

3.   Nouns and Pronouns

Nouns have more news value than pronouns. A noun object, therefore, follows a pronoun object.

   Ich habe *es* meinem Sohn schon gesagt.

   Ich kaufe *mir* morgen einen Zylinder.

4.   Dative and Accusative Nouns

Nouns preceded by definite articles (**der**, **die**, **das**) usually refer to something already known or mentioned before. Nouns preceded by indefinite articles (**ein Buch** - plural: **Bücher**), on the other hand, usually introduce something not mentioned before, something, therefore, of news value.

Since the sequence of elements in the inner field is determined by increasing news value, noun objects preceded by definite articles are usually placed before nouns preceded by indefinite articles.

   Sie hat dem Zugführer *eine große Summe* Geld geschenkt.
       (implication: what a present!)

   Sie hat das viele Geld *einem Zugführer* geschenkt.
       (implication: what a social gesture!)

If both nouns are preceded by a definite article, the sequence is also determined by news value.

>Hat sie den Güllenern *die ganze Milliarde* geschenkt?

In the sentence above, the core of the question is: "What did they receive?"

>Hat sie die Milliarde *den Güllenern* geschenkt?

This sentence asks what happened to the billion.

5.   Time Phrases

The position of time phrases in the inner field is again determined by news value, but they must precede **ein**-objects, which are position-fixed at the end of the inner field.

Sie hat	ihnen *heute* das Geld	geschenkt.
Sie hat	ihnen das Geld *heute*	geschenkt.
Sie hat	ihnen *heute* <u>e</u>ine Milliarde	geschenkt.

Several time phrases follow each other in the order of greater specificity.

>Sie ist   heute morgen um elf Uhr siebenundzwanzig   angekommen.

6.   Place Phrases

Sentences of the type:

>Ich kaufe mir *morgen in Kaffigen* ein Porträt der Claire Zachanassian.

are so frequent that one can say: usually place follows time. The rule is generally: WANN - WIE - WO.

On the whole, place phrases which are neither directives, nor used in connection with a preceding time phrase are comparatively rare. Their position within the inner field depends on their *news value*.

>Ill hat die Kläri *in Güllen* kennengelernt.
>>(answer to implied question: Wo hat er sie kennengelernt?)

>Ill hat damals in Güllen *die Kläri* kennengelernt.
>>(answer to implied question: Wen hat er damals kennengelernt?
>>or: Was hat er damals gemacht?)

In Summary: Pronouns (no news value) are positioned-fixed at the beginning of the inner field. **Ein**-nouns (always of news value) are position-fixed at the end of the inner field. The elements in-between are interchangeable (except for the fixed **wann**-**wie**-**wo** sequence), and their order depends largely on increasing news value.

Dependent Clauses

Verb-last Position

Dependent clauses are usually introduced by a connecting word: a subordinating conjunction (**weil**, **während**, **daß** ...), a relative pronoun (**der**, **dessen**, **denen** ...) or an interrogative pronoun (**was**, **wodurch** ...). If **daß** is left out, the unintroduced clause has the same structure and word order as a main clause.

In all introduced dependent clauses the inflected verb appears at the end of the sentence field. We speak of the verb-last position.

Dependent Clauses in End-Field or Front-Field

1. Usually a dependent clause adds information to the rheme of an assertion and is thus part of the sentence field of a main clause.

Front Field	Sentence Field
Claire	weiß es.
Claire	weiß, daß die Güllener zu ihr kommen werden.
Claire	weiß es, weil sie die Menschen kennt.

The whole main clause acts here as theme and the dependent clause is its rheme. German tends to finish a given rheme before introducing another theme. Therefore it avoids starting a second dependent clause before finishing the first, as you would do in English. The following sentence is <u>a</u>wkward:

> **Claire weiß, daß, wenn die Güllener kein Geld haben, sie zu ihr kommen werden.**

German prefers to put the second dependent clause after the first, taking the first dependent clause as a theme and the second as its rheme:

Theme	Rheme > Theme	Rheme
C. weiß,	daß die G. zu ihr kommen werden,	wenn sie kein Geld haben.

Thus, the rheme of one assertion becomes the theme of the next, which in turn has its own corresponding rheme.

Claire weiß,	daß die Güllener zu ihr kommen werden.
Die Güllener werden zu ihr kommen,	wenn sie kein Geld haben.

This *interlocking* of theme and rheme is typical of the way German discourse is built.

2.   A dependent clause can constitute also the theme of an assertion and in this case, it precedes the main clause. The main clause becomes the rheme.

Theme	Rheme
Weil Güllen arm ist,	hat kein Mensch eine Uhr.

If the dependent clause precedes the main clause, it is considered the first element of the main clause (front field or theme). It must, therefore, be followed by the inflected verb of the main clause (verb-second position).

Position of Subject in Dependent Clauses

In most dependent clauses, the subject follows the connecting word. However, a noun subject may be preceded by pronoun subjects.

> Ich weiß, daß sich **kein Mensch** daran erinnern kann.
> Ich weiß, daß es ihm **der Bürgermeister** erzählt hat.

In order to increase the news value of a noun subject, it may be moved toward the end of the inner field of the dependent clause. Thus, in the following sentences the news value shifts from the *time* element to the *subject*.

Ich kann mich erinnern, daß der Rasende Roland *vor fünf Jahren um diese Zeit* in Güllen gehalten hat. (*stress on time*)

Ich kann mich erinnern, daß vor fünf Jahren um diese Zeit mit kreischenden Bremsen und qualmendem Dampf *der Rasende Roland* in Güllen gehalten hat. (*stress on subject*)

Note how moving the subject towards the end makes its arrival all the more suspenseful!

21G.404 German IV
Spring 2005