Manuel Kauers
RISC-Linz

Hagenberg, 19. März 2003

# Word Order in German Sentences

Main Clauses and Subclauses

## Main Clauses – Hauptsätze

- Example:

  *Der Mann gibt dem Kind den Schlüssel der Mutter.*

Mann, $m$ – man
geben – give
Kind, $n$ – child
Schlüssel, $m$ – key
Mutter, $f$ – mother

- This sentence contains all cases: *der Mann* is nominative, *dem Kind* is dative, *den Schüssel* is accusative, and *der Mutter* is genitive (the mother's key).

- There are other admissible arrangements of this sentence, like

  *Dem Kind gibt der Mann den Schlüssel der Mutter.*
  *Den Schlüssel der Mutter gibt dem Kind der Mann.*
  *Den Schlüssel der Mutter gibt der Mann dem Kind.*
  ...

- They all have the same meaning (modulo emphasis) and might be used interchangable.

- Every thinkable order of the "building blocks" *der Mann*, *gibt*, *dem Kind*, *den Schlüssel der Mutter* is admissible provided that the verb *gibt* comes at the second position.

- This is like planets which are moving around the sun (the verb)

- Note that *den Schlüssel der Mutter* is only one building block, because *der Mutter* refers to *den Schlüssel*, not to the verb *gibt*.

- In a certain sense, this building block is like a planet with a moon, because also *der Mutter* can "rotate" around *den Schlüssel* (then hiding the article): You can say *der Mutter Schlüssel* — this is correct but not common.

- **Rule:** In every well formed german sentence, the verb comes at the second position. As a rule of thumb, the position of everything else is arbitrary.

- You can also put the verb at the first position, then you get a question. If the verb is at any other position, then it's a mistake.

- If the verb is split into parts, then the above rules apply to the conjucated part, and the splitted part goes always to the end.

**Exercise**

- Separate the building blocks of the following examples by vertical bars.

  *Morgen findet kein Deutschkurs statt.*
  *Der Apfel fällt nicht weit vom Stamm.*[1]
  *Frau Mayrs Englisch ist nicht besonders gut.*

- Find all possible arrangements, without questions, of the sentence

  *Franz spricht im Forum über die Arbeit im Institut.*

  (Hint: I found six.) In general, if there are $n$ building blocks, how many possible arrangements are there? `;-)`

- If there are so many right possibilities to form a sentence, how should you decide which one to choose?

Morgen – tomorrow
stattfinden – take place
kein – no
Deutschkurs, *m* – German class
Apfel, *m* – apple
fallen – fall
nicht – not
weit – far
vom ~ from
Stamm – bole or clan
besonders – especially
gut – good

sprechen – speak
im – in the
über – about
Arbeit, *f* – work
Institut, *n* – institute

## Subclauses – Nebensätze

- If $A$ and $B$ are sentences, then so are

| | |
|---|---|
| *A, und B* | and |
| *A, oder B* | or |
| *Entweder A, oder B* | either $A$ or $B$ |
| *A, denn B* | since/because |
| *A, but B* | aber |
| *Nicht A, sondern B* | Not $A$, but $B$ |
| *Nicht nur A, sondern auch B* | Not only $A$, but also $B$ |

- *Entweder*, *Nicht*, *Nicht nur* may or may not count as a building block of $A$ and influence its word order accordingly. *Entweder* usually does, the others usually don't.

- Factorisation is possible: Instead of

  *Franz spricht heute und Heinrich spricht morgen.*

  you can say

  *Franz spricht heute und Heinrich morgen.*

- These are main clause connections. They are boring...

- We consider subclauses that start with subjunctions. They are summarized in the following table:

[1] German saying expressing that children's behaviour is usually similar to that of their parents. (Note the double meaning of *Stamm*!)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *weil* | because | *obwohl* | although |
| *wenn* | if (cond.) | *ob* | if, whether |
| *während* | while | *nachdem* | after |
| *bevor* | before | *dass / daß* | that |
| *als* | as (temp.) | *falls* | in case |

- In a subclause, the subjunction takes the first position, and the verb must be put at the very end. There is no splitting of verbs.

*Mohammed kann arabisch, weil er aus Ägypten kommt.*
*Es ist laut, während sie hart arbeiten.*
*Er sagt, daß morgen kein Deutschkurs stattfindet.*
*Sie geht nach Hause, wenn es fünf Uhr ist.*

können – can
arabisch – arabic
er – he
aus – from
Ägypten – egypt
kommen – come
laut – loud
hart – hard
arbeiten – work
gehen – go
nach Hause – (to) home
fünf Uhr – five o'clock

- Subclauses can never stand alone. There must be at least one main clause per sentence.

- Subclauses can of course be iterated:

*Nino sagt am Telefon, daß sie nicht zum Deutschkurs kommt, weil sie krank ist.*

sagen – say
am (an dem) – at the
Telefon, *n* – phone
sie – she
zum (zu dem) – to the
krank – ill

- Clauses can be nested. A subclause can be put at the beginning, at the end, or even in the middle of another subclause:

*Weil sie krank ist, geht sie nach Hause.*
*Sie geht, weil sie krank ist, nach Hause.*
*Sie geht nach Hause, weil sie krank ist.*

Note that a subclause counts as a building block of the surrounding clause, and may influence its word order.

- Also the question words like *wer* (who) may serve as subjunctions.

*Du weißt sicher, wer heute fehlt.*

du – you
wissen – know
sicher – certainly
heute – today
fehlen – miss

Such subclauses are called implicit question clauses (*indirekte Fragesätze*)

- The articles serve as subjunctions when forming relative clauses (*Relativsätze*). Relative clauses are put directly behind the noun to which they refer. If there is no abiguity, they may also be put at the end of the clause.

*Hunde, die bellen, beißen nicht.*[2]

Hund, *m* – dog
bellen – bark
beißen – bite

**Exercise**

- Build from the vocabulary you know an example for a sentence with subclause to each of the subjunctions from the table. (Omit *nachdem* and *bevor*; they require tenses.)

[2]German saying.

- Build from the vocabulary you know a sentence with more than one sub-clause.
- In English there is no distinction between implicit question clauses and relative clauses, both start with who, which, whose, etc. What is the difference in German? Give examples for both kind of clauses.
- Formulate the following questions indirectly using phrases like *Ich weiss* (I know), *Es ist egal/Es spielt keine Rolle* (It doesn't matter), *Ich kann mir denken* (I can imagine), etc.

*Was machst Du morgen?*
*Wo wohnst Du?*
*Wer geht gleich zum Unimarkt?*
*Ist morgen Seminar?*[3]

was – what
machen – do
wohnen – live/stay
gehen – go
gleich – soon
zum – to the
Seminar, *n* – seminar

[3] Hint: use *ob*