

**A CONTRASTIVE LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF GERMAN AND ENGLISH SYNTAX:
A CORPUS-BASED STUDY**

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Abstract: The area of linguistics known as syntax examines how words and phrases are put together to create grammatically sound sentences. It looks at word order, sentence structure, and the connections between various sentence components, demonstrating how these configurations impact meaning. Syntax explains why certain sentences in a language are correct while others are not, as well as how shifting word order can alter meaning or emphasis. Understanding how meaning is organized and communicated across languages depends critically on syntax. Despite the fact that German and English are closely related Germanic languages, there are still notable distinctions in word order, phrase structure, and grammatical patterns.

The syntactic similarities and differences between the two languages are examined in this article using a corpus-based method. The final analysis focuses on differences in verb placement, negation patterns, main and subordinate sentence forms, and modal auxiliary usage. The results indicate that German has more flexible constituent placement, affected by verb-second (V2) norms and separable prefixes, whereas English tends to favor relatively stable Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order. The findings highlight how crucial syntactic awareness is for teachers, translators, and language learners. In addition to improving theoretical comprehension, this contrastive technique offers helpful advice for successfully teaching German and English grammar.

Key words: German syntax, English syntax, contrastive linguistics, corpus-based study, clause structure, word order, modal verbs

Аннотация: Синтаксис играет ключевую роль в понимании того, как строится и передаётся смысл в разных языках. Немецкий и английский языки, относящиеся к германской группе, имеют много общих синтаксических черт, однако между ними существуют значительные различия в порядке слов, структуре предложений и грамматических конструкциях. В данной статье используется корпусный подход для изучения синтаксических сходств и различий между двумя языками. На основе анализа академических публикаций и корпусов, рассматриваются конструкции главных и придаточных предложений, порядок слов, отрицание и использование модальных глаголов. Результаты показывают, что английский язык склонен к фиксированному порядку SVO (подлежащее-глагол-дополнение), тогда как немецкий язык демонстрирует более гибкое размещение компонентов предложения, обусловленное правилом V2 и приставочными глаголами. Данные различия имеют большое значение для изучающих языки, переводчиков и преподавателей. Контрастивный подход способствует как теоретическому пониманию, так и практическому применению при обучении немецкой и английской синтаксике.

Ключевые слова: немецкий синтаксис, английский синтаксис, контрастивная лингвистика, корпусное исследование, структура предложения, порядок слов, модальные глаголы

INTRODUCTION

A fundamental aspect of contrastive linguistics is the study of syntax, or how words and phrases are arranged to make coherent sentences. The way linguistic components interact to communicate meaning is governed by syntax, and even small variations can have a big impact on understanding, translation, and learning a second language. As West Germanic languages, German and English share basic grammatical characteristics such as modal verb usage, auxiliary forms, and finite-infinite verb differences. Nevertheless, the two languages exhibit significant syntactic differences that might provide significant difficulties for learners and interpreters despite these common origins (Cermakova, Hasselgard, Mala, & Sebestova, 2024).

In a number of instances, these differences are quite noticeable. English maintains a consistent Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order, whereas German utilizes verb-second (V2) principles in main sentences and verb-final positions in subordinate clauses. Additionally, there are differences in verb placement that impact the interpretation of tense, aspect, mood, and modality, especially when working with auxiliary and modal verbs. Syntactic behavior is further complicated by the way modal verbs interact with negation and adverbial phrases (Freiwald, 2023; Beyer & Frassinelli, 2024). For example, while English often demands a fixed sequence for clarity and stylistic acceptability, German permits fronting adverbials and variable object placement without breaking grammar rules.

Research on contrastive syntax has greatly advanced due to the increasing use of corpus-based techniques. Linguists can conduct both quantitative and qualitative analyses using large-scale corpora, which offer real-world instances of language use in many registers. A more complex knowledge of cross-linguistic differences can be obtained by empirically examining frequency counts, collocational patterns, and contextual modifications of syntactic structures (CroCo Corpus Project, 2023; Ström Herold & Levin, 2024). These techniques also enable academics to examine variance in scholarly, journalistic, and informal texts, demonstrating how sentence structure in each language is shaped by stylistic and functional restrictions.

Contrastive studies can find persistent divergences and convergences by analyzing real texts in various registers. For instance, English usually uses word order and auxiliary verbs to accomplish a comparable discourse purpose, whereas German may use verb-final formulations in subordinate clauses to encode backgrounded information. According to Trawiński, Kupietz, Proost, and Zinken (2023), translators may inadvertently distort meaning when directly mapping German structures onto English syntax, or vice versa, and learners frequently overgeneralize rules from their native language, resulting in ungrammatical constructions.

Word order in main and subordinate clauses, the placement of verbs and auxiliaries, negation techniques, and the interaction with modal verbs like "can/must, and sollen/should are some of the major syntactic phenomena that this study focuses on to show both similarities and differences between German and English (Werner, 2023; Chen, Zhao, & Breitbarth, 2024). Due to their context-dependent meanings, these structures, which are essential for communicating meaning and modality in both languages, frequently present learning challenges. For instance, the English *should* tends to convey advisory meaning, whereas the German *sollen* might signify reported obligation or evidentiality. Ignoring these differences could lead to pragmatic errors in translation or second-language writing.

In order to find structural trends and distinctions between German and English, contrastive syntactic research is increasingly depending on corpus-based methods. By examining the

frequency and distribution of syntactic structures, corpus analyses offer empirical support for differences in modal verb usage, word order, and sentence embedding (Yulian et al., 2025; Impersonalization in German and English Online Reviews, 2023). These analyses also allow academics to monitor changing patterns in spoken and written language, such as the persistent use of *m²* in German academic writing or the progressive substitution of *have to* for *must* in spoken English discourse.

Furthermore, a deeper comprehension of register-specific syntactic behavior is made possible by corpus-based research. While English maintains stricter linearity and frequently uses auxiliary verbs and lexical devices to communicate stress or modality, German texts typically display more complex clause embedding and variable constituent placement in academic and formal writing. Understanding these patterns is essential for theoretical linguistics as well as real-world applications in automated language processing, translation, and language instruction.

The V2 rule in main sentences, which mandates that the finite verb take the second position, and verb-final positioning in subordinate clauses are characteristics of German syntax (Freiwald, 2023). English, on the other hand, uses a quite strict SVO order, with auxiliary verbs coming before main verbs in compound tenses or inquiries. Negation is also treated differently: English use *not* with auxiliary verbs, but German often uses “*nicht*” or “*kein*” depending on the syntactic environment (CroCo Corpus Project, 2023).

A qualitative literature evaluation and analysis of current corpora released between 2022 and 2025 serve as the foundation for this study. Peer-reviewed journal publications, computational corpus research, and comparative evaluations of real texts are examples of sources (Cermakova et al., 2024; Beyer & Frassinelli, 2024; Ström Herold & Levin, 2024). This study identifies both convergent and divergent aspects of German and English through a methodical comparison of syntactic structures.

The arrangement of sentence components is one of the most obvious distinctions between German and English syntax. Because of the V2 (verb-second) rule in main clauses and verb-final positioning in subordinate clauses, German has a flexible word order that enables the speaker to emphasize different parts of a sentence for information structuring or emphasis. For example:

German main clause (V2): *Gestern hat Maria das Buch gelesen.* (“Yesterday Maria read the book.”) — Here, the finite verb *hat* occupies the second position, while the temporal adverb *gestern* is fronted.

German subordinate clause (verb-final): *..., weil Maria das Buch gestern gelesen hat.* (“...because Maria read the book yesterday.”) — The finite verb *hat* moves to the end.

In contrast, English follows a more rigid Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order in both main and subordinate clauses:

Yesterday Maria read the book.

...because Maria read the book yesterday.

Corpus-based studies (CroCo Corpus Project, 2023; Trawiński et al., 2023) show that German authors frequently exploit flexible positioning to mark topic, focus, or contrastive emphasis, while English writers typically use syntactic or lexical devices (e.g., cleft sentences) rather than word order variations to achieve similar discourse effects. This difference is critical in translation

and second-language acquisition, as learners may overgeneralize English SVO constraints when producing German sentences, leading to unnatural phrasing.

Subordinate clauses in German differ structurally from English. The verb-final rule in German subordinate clauses can create long dependencies, especially in complex sentences with embedded clauses. For instance:

Ich glaube, dass er das Buch gestern gelesen hat. (“I believe that he read the book yesterday.”)
— The verb *hat* appears at the end, creating a “wrap-up” effect for the information.

English subordinate clauses, by contrast, retain the SVO order:

I believe that he read the book yesterday.

German subordinate clauses frequently permit several fronted elements (adverbs, objects) without violating grammaticality, according to recent corpus research (Werner, 2023; Beyer & Frassinelli, 2024). This can have an impact on emphasis and information structuring. However, fronting frequently adds stylistic marking, and English demands more rigorous sequencing. Because incorrect element placement might result in semantic or pragmatic misinterpretation, it is crucial for translators and language learners to comprehend these patterns.

Modal verbs interact differently with main verbs and auxiliary verbs in German and English. Corpus analyses (Freiwald, 2023; Chen, Zhao, & Breitbarth, 2024; Rahmatullayeva & Sabirova, 2025) reveal several key distinctions:

1. **Obligation / Necessity:** *müssen* in German expresses strong necessity or requirement and can appear with both finite and infinitive constructions: *Die Studierenden müssen die Aufgabe pünktlich abgeben.* In English, *must* conveys a similar obligation but is gradually supplemented or replaced by *have to* in spoken contexts.
2. **Ability / Possibility:** *können* and *can* are generally parallel, indicating capability or potential. However, corpus data suggest subtle pragmatic differences: *können* in German may sometimes imply conditionality or politeness in formal writing, whereas *can* is often straightforwardly factual.
3. **Advice / Recommendation:** *sollen* frequently carries evidential or reported obligation in German texts, particularly in media or academic discourse, while *should* in English primarily conveys advisory meaning. For example:
 - a. German: *Die Regierung soll neue Richtlinien veröffentlicht haben.* (“The government is reported to have issued new guidelines.”)
 - b. English: *The government should issue new guidelines.* (advisory, not necessarily reported information)

Corpus frequency analysis (CroCo Corpus Project, 2023) demonstrates that German academic writing prefers modal verbs with less hedging, whereas English employs additional modal auxiliaries or adverbs to soften statements (e.g., *may*, *might*, *could*). These distinctions are important for teaching pragmatic nuance in translation and second-language writing.

Negation in English and German shows systematic differences. English relies on auxiliary verbs (*do not, cannot, did not*) in most tense-aspect constructions, whereas German uses *nicht* for general negation and *kein* for nominal negation:

- a. English: *She cannot attend the meeting.*
- b. German: *Sie kann nicht an der Sitzung teilnehmen.*

Corpus studies (Yulian et al., 2025; Freiwald, 2023) indicate that German allows greater flexibility in negation placement within a sentence, especially in complex sentences. For learners, transferring English negation rules directly to German may lead to semantic or stylistic inaccuracies.

German allows for subtle information architecture that can indicate emphasis, backgrounding, or evidentiality because of its variable word order and verb-final subordinate clauses. English frequently uses lexical or syntactic alternatives to convey identical discourse functions because of its more rigid SVO structure (Werner, 2023; Beyer & Frassinelli, 2024).

Corpus-based observations also show variations in style and frequency: academic German texts tend to use verb-final, succinct structures with few auxiliary verbs, while English texts frequently use modal phrases and several auxiliaries to clarify or hedge the writer's position (Processing "loose" argument structure in West Germanic languages, 2025). Translators, academic writers, and students who want to produce language in a natural, register-appropriate manner must comprehend these stylistic trends.

CONCLUSION

This article shows that although German and English share many syntactic characteristics because of their shared Germanic ancestry, there are notable differences in word order, sentence embedding, modal verb usage, and negation. According to corpus-based research, English's more rigid SVO order and auxiliary-driven modal constructions contrast with German's flexibility with constituent order and verb location, together with subtle modal verb functions.

Language learners, translators, and educators must comprehend these distinctions since failing to identify cross-linguistic syntactic divergences can result in stylistic mistakes, pragmatic misunderstandings, and incorrect translations. To emphasize these structural and functional differences, pedagogical approaches should incorporate corpus examples, contextualized activities, and contrastive analysis. Learners can build both grammatical competence and pragmatic awareness by interacting with real texts and observing how syntactic choices interact with discourse context, register, and modality.

The importance of corpus-based contrastive studies as a methodological tool is further highlighted by this study. Linguists and educators can transition from prescriptive descriptions to data-driven, evidence-based education by using corpora, which offer empirical evidence of frequency patterns, variance among registers, and context-dependent usage. Students who are exposed to these analyses are more equipped to handle syntactic intricacies in writing and translation, especially in academic and professional settings where accuracy and appropriateness are crucial. In conclusion, contrastive corpus-based studies offer a robust framework for understanding syntactic similarities and divergences between German and English. They not only contribute to theoretical insights in contrastive linguistics but also inform practical strategies for language teaching, translation, and multilingual communication. Integrating corpus-based evidence into pedagogical practice fosters a deeper syntactic awareness, enhances translation accuracy, and equips learners to produce written communication that is both stylistically coherent and pragmatically appropriate (Cermakova et al., 2024; Beyer & Frassinelli,

2024; CroCo Corpus Project, 2023). Ultimately, as global communication and multilingual education continue to expand, such studies provide essential tools for bridging linguistic gaps, promoting intercultural understanding, and supporting learners in navigating the complexities of German and English syntax.

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