

**THE ROLE OF THE VERB POSITION IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN SENTENCES
STRUCTURE**

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Abstract. The verb is the central grammatical element of a sentence, as it encodes predication, determines argument structure, and anchors tense, mood, and agreement relations. In syntactic theory, the position of the verb is crucial because it reflects underlying clause architecture and governs how subjects, objects, and modifiers are structurally related. In Germanic languages, verb position is particularly significant, as it serves as a primary indicator of clause type and grammatical well-formedness. This article investigates the role of verb position in English and German sentence structure, focusing on how verbal placement shapes word order patterns and syntactic interpretation. While German systematically employs verb movement, most notably through the verb-second (V2) constraint in main clauses and verb-final order in subordinate clauses, English relies largely on a fixed subject–verb–object structure with limited verb displacement. Drawing on a qualitative review of recent linguistic research published between 2023 and 2025, the study examines verb movement, word order variation, and non-canonical constructions in both languages. The findings demonstrate that German verb position is strongly regulated by morphosyntactic principles and information structure, whereas English compensates for reduced verb movement through rigid linear order and auxiliary-based constructions. These differences have important implications for syntactic theory, second language acquisition, and contrastive linguistic analysis.

Key words: verb position, verb movement, word order, V2 phenomenon, English, German, syntax

Аннотация. Глагол является ключевым элементом структуры предложения, поскольку он выражает предикативность, определяет количество и тип аргументов, а также кодирует грамматические категории времени, наклонения и согласования. Позиция глагола в предложении имеет принципиальное значение, так как она отражает глубинную синтаксическую организацию и служит показателем типа предложения. В германских языках расположение глагола играет особенно важную роль, поскольку именно оно во многом определяет грамматическую корректность высказывания. В данной статье рассматривается роль позиции глагола в структуре предложения английского и немецкого языков. Немецкий язык характеризуется активным глагольным перемещением, в частности правилом второго положения глагола (V2) в главных предложениях и финальной позицией глагола в придаточных конструкциях. Английский язык, напротив, в основном использует фиксированный порядок слов типа подлежащее–сказуемое–дополнение и демонстрирует ограниченное перемещение глагола. Исследование основано на качественном анализе современных научных публикаций 2023–2025 годов. Результаты показывают, что позиция глагола в немецком языке определяется морфосинтаксическими и дискурсивными факторами, тогда как в английском языке грамматическая структура обеспечивается строгим линейным порядком и использованием вспомогательных

глаголов. Полученные данные имеют важное значение для теории синтаксиса, изучения иностранных языков и контрастивной лингвистики.

Ключевые слова: позиция глагола, глагольное перемещение, порядок слов, феномен V2, английский язык, немецкий язык

INTRODUCTION

It has long been known that one of the most important factors in the syntactic structure of Germanic languages is verb position. The verb, which serves as the grammatical center of the clause, controls the hierarchical arrangement of syntactic parts in addition to encoding semantic predication. According to modern syntactic theory, verb placement reflects deeper structural mechanisms including phrase typing, functional projections, and verb mobility. The contrast between English and German is particularly instructive because, despite a shared Germanic origin, their verb placement systems differ significantly. German is a verb-second (V2) language, meaning that the finite verb typically appears in the second position of main clauses, regardless of which element comes first:

Heute liest Maria ein Buch. → “Today, Maria is reading a book.”

English shows only limited V2 behavior, mostly in questions or with auxiliaries:

Is Maria reading a book?

Otherwise, English follows a **fixed Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order**:

Maria is reading a book.

These differences are linked to typological, morphological, and historical factors rather than surface variation. Biberauer and Roberts (2023) note that the richness of verb inflection in German supports flexible movement, while English, with reduced inflection, favors linear word order. Similarly, Chen et al. (2024) show that while German retains its core verb placement rules, English has gradually reduced syntactic verb mobility over time. This comparison highlights how morphology and historical change shape syntactic structures, explaining why two related languages can develop such different verb placement systems. Verb location has significant effects on language learning and bilingualism that go beyond theoretical linguistics. Research shows that while English learners rely more on linear word order techniques, German learners frequently face ongoing challenges with V2 limitations (Westergaard et al., 2025). Furthermore, non-standard varieties like Kiezdeutsch show that verb position is subject to discourse and sociolinguistic circumstances, challenging conventional beliefs about strict V2 constraints (Wiese & Rehbein, 2025). In light of these observations, the present study synthesizes existing research to provide a comprehensive analysis of verb position in both English and German. The main aim is to explain how variation in verb placement is constrained, how verbs function across different types of sentences, and what these patterns reveal about the overall organization of syntax. By examining these patterns, the study not only highlights language-specific rules but also offers insights into general principles of sentence structure and the interaction between syntax and discourse. To achieve this goal, the study employs a qualitative literature review methodology. This approach is particularly suitable for exploring theoretical and descriptive

issues in syntax, as it allows the researcher to examine a wide range of arguments, data, and perspectives without the limitations of statistical analysis. Through careful evaluation of prior studies, the work identifies recurring patterns, debates, and points of agreement in the field, enabling a nuanced understanding of verb placement phenomena. The data set for this review consists of peer-reviewed journal articles and recent preprints published between 2023 and 2025. These sources focus specifically on verb position, verb movement, and word order variation in both English and German, ensuring that the analysis is grounded in the most up-to-date research. For example, studies on German infinitival complementation and word order variation (De Cesare et al., 2024) shed light on how verbs interact with objects and subordinate clauses, while research on processing constraints in non-canonical constructions (Felser & Bosch, 2024) highlights how sentence complexity affects comprehension and production. Comparative studies, such as Chen et al. (2024), examine syntactic change in English and German, providing historical context for why English now exhibits a more rigid SVO order compared to the flexible verb placement of modern German. Theoretical discussions on verb movement and V2 phenomena (Biberauer & Roberts, 2023; Catasso, 2024) explore the underlying grammatical mechanisms that govern German sentence structure, particularly the movement of finite verbs in main and subordinate clauses. Finally, research on language acquisition and non-standard varieties (Westergaard et al., 2025; Wiese & Rehbein, 2025) is included to capture a broader empirical perspective. These studies show how verb placement rules are acquired by learners and how they may vary in dialects or informal speech, highlighting the interaction between grammatical theory and real-world language use. By integrating findings from these diverse sources, the study provides a holistic overview of verb placement in German and English, emphasizing both the theoretical foundations and practical implications of verb movement, sentence structure, and word order. This comprehensive approach allows for a deeper understanding of how languages organize information syntactically and how these structures interact with discourse, focus, and communicative intent.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the sources were categorized according to their primary focus: main clause verb position, subordinate clause structure, or syntactic variation. Second, recurring patterns and theoretical claims were identified and compared across studies. Third, the findings were interpreted from a contrastive perspective to highlight systematic differences between English and German. This method allows for an integrated synthesis of German maintains a highly structured verb placement system, as the studied literature consistently demonstrates. The finite verb must always appear in the second position in major sentences; this pattern is consistent across registers and genres. The verb maintains its second position even when the subject is not sentence-initial, indicating that V2 is a structural rather than a linear constraint (Vikner & Woods, 2023).

The finite verb appears at the end of German subordinate sentences, which exhibit verb-final order. The importance of complementizers and clause-typing systems is highlighted by the stark contrast between main and subordinate clauses. Additionally, De Cesare et al. (2024) demonstrate that infinitival complementation permits some variation, but that variation is limited by syntactic and processing characteristics rather than free will. English, by contrast, exhibits minimal verb movement. Lexical verbs typically remain in a fixed position following the subject, and syntactic variation is largely achieved through auxiliary verbs. Diachronic analyses confirm that earlier stages of English displayed more flexible verb placement, but these properties have been largely lost in modern usage (Chen et al., 2024). As a result, English relies on strict linear order to encode grammatical relations.

Comparative studies also reveal that morphological complexity plays a crucial role. Languages with richer inflectional systems, such as German, tolerate greater surface variation while maintaining underlying constraints. English compensates for reduced morphology through rigid syntactic order (Tatariya et al., 2025). The study emphasizes that verb position is a central feature distinguishing German and English syntax. In German, verb placement is governed by a complex set of movement rules. One of the most prominent phenomena is **verb-second (V2) word order** in main clauses, where the finite verb typically occupies the second position regardless of what element starts the sentence.

For example:

German main clause (V2):

Heute liest Maria ein Buch.

(Today reads Maria a book.) → “Today, Maria is reading a book.”

Here, the adverb Heute (today) is in the initial position, but the finite verb liest still appears in the second slot. This demonstrates that in German, fronted elements such as temporal expressions, topicalized objects, or even subordinate clauses can trigger verb movement to maintain the V2 structure (Vikner & Woods, 2023).

In subordinate clauses, however, German typically exhibits verb-final word order, with the finite verb moving to the end of the clause:

German subordinate clause:

Ich glaube, dass Maria ein Buch liest.

(I believe that Maria a book reads.) → “I believe that Maria is reading a book.”

This flexibility in verb placement highlights the interaction between **syntax and communicative intent**. By changing which element is fronted, speakers can emphasize different parts of the sentence. For instance:

Topicalized object:

Ein Buch liest Maria heute.

(A book reads Maria today.) → Emphasizes the book as the topic.

The finite verb acts as a pivot around which subjects, objects, and modifiers are organized, allowing German speakers to convey subtle nuances in focus, information structure, and discourse prominence (De Cesare et al., 2024). This hierarchical system makes German syntax morphosyntactically rich but also more complex for processing.

English, by contrast, shows much more rigid word order with very limited verb movement. Finite verbs almost always follow the subject, while auxiliary verbs indicate tense, aspect, and mood:

a. **English main clause:**

Maria is reading a book today.

b. **English subordinate clause:**

I believe that Maria is reading a book.

Unlike German, English rarely allows topicalization to change verb position. Even when an element is fronted for emphasis, the finite verb usually remains directly after the subject:

Fronting for emphasis:

Today, Maria is reading a book.

(The verb position is unchanged; only the adverb is fronted.)

Historically, English exhibited somewhat more flexible verb placement, especially in older forms like Middle English. However, over time, there has been a **diachronic reduction of verb movement**, leading to a more uniform SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) order (Chen et al., 2024). This consistency simplifies sentence parsing and reduces ambiguity, which is particularly helpful for language processing: readers and listeners can rely on linear order rather than hierarchical cues to interpret grammatical relations (Tatariya et al., 2025).

In summary, while **German syntax relies heavily on hierarchical movement and flexible verb placement to encode information structure**, **English prioritizes linear order and auxiliary marking**, creating a more stable but less morphologically rich system. These differences not only reflect structural contrasts but also shape how speakers of each language convey focus, topicality, and emphasis in everyday communication.

These cross-linguistic differences have significant implications for language acquisition. Learners of German must acquire abstract movement principles that are not immediately observable from English input, which explains the persistent errors related to V2 and verb-final placement in subordinate clauses. Studies in bilingualism and second language acquisition suggest that such difficulties arise not only from processing limitations but also from the need to internalize a fundamentally different grammatical system (Westergaard et al., 2025; Felser & Bosch, 2024). Learners must integrate syntactic knowledge with discourse awareness to produce contextually appropriate and grammatically correct sentences, particularly in formal or academic registers. From a theoretical perspective, recent cartographic approaches argue that verb position reflects the interaction between multiple functional projections in the left periphery of the clause (Catasso, 2024). This view explains why German exhibits systematic V2 behavior and why certain non-canonical structures—such as infinitival complements or topicalized constructions—require careful syntactic interpretation. Additionally, computational studies indicate that verb position remains challenging for large language models trained on massive data sets, suggesting that its structural complexity is cognitively significant and not merely a formal property of grammar (Menschikov et al., 2025). The contrast between English and German also illustrates how typological and historical factors shape syntactic patterns. German's richer inflectional morphology supports flexible word order and movement-based strategies, while English relies on rigid linear sequences and functional auxiliaries to convey grammatical relationships. These differences are not superficial but reflect deeper organizational principles, demonstrating how language structure is influenced by morphology, information structure, discourse demands, and historical evolution (Biberauer & Roberts, 2023). In conclusion, verb position should be understood as a multidimensional construct, integrating morphosyntactic, cognitive, and discourse-related factors. Its study provides crucial insights into sentence architecture, cross-linguistic variation, and second language learning. By examining how verbs are positioned in English and German, researchers and educators can better appreciate the complexity of syntactic systems and develop more effective strategies for teaching, translation, and contrastive linguistic analysis.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that verb position is a central organizing principle in both German and English. German employs a movement-based system, with finite verbs occupying the second position in main clauses and the final position in subordinate clauses, while English relies on a largely fixed subject–verb–object order with limited auxiliary-based movement (Biberauer & Roberts, 2023; Vikner & Woods, 2023). These structural differences reflect deeper typological and morphological contrasts. German’s rich inflectional system allows flexible word order governed by grammatical rules, whereas English compensates for reduced movement through linear sequencing and auxiliary constructions (Chen et al., 2024; Tatariya et al., 2025). The findings have practical implications for second language learning and contrastive linguistics. German learners must master abstract movement rules, while English learners focus on linear order and auxiliaries. Understanding these distinctions helps produce grammatically accurate, contextually appropriate, and stylistically nuanced sentences (Westergaard et al., 2025). In conclusion, verb position is not merely a syntactic feature but a reflection of broader linguistic organization, impacting theory, pedagogy, and cross-linguistic analysis. Future research should continue examining its interaction with information structure, modality, and evolving language varieties.

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