

## *Original Paper*

# A Study for Syntactic Linearity Based on the Perspective of Linguistic Typology —Taking the English and German Declarative Sentence as Examples

Yang Wang<sup>1\*</sup> & Junjie Yu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Civil Aviation Flight University of China, Chengdu City, Sichuan Province, China

\* Yang Wang, School of Foreign Languages, Civil Aviation Flight University of China, Chengdu City, Sichuan Province, China

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### ***Abstract***

*Based on the perspective of linguistic typology, this paper compares and analyzes the similarities and differences of the word order in English and German declarative sentences in order to seek the theoretical explanations for the feasibility of syntactic linearity. Starting from the analysis of word order of declarative sentences in English and German, “Two-steps Method” is recommended as judging the features of the source language’s word order before adjusting it of the target language so as to ensure the fluency, accuracy and legitimacy of the interpreting process.*

### ***Key words***

*linguistic typology, syntactic linearity, word order of declarative sentence, translation*

## **1. Introduction**

Syntactic linearity is also known as Source language-oriented principle, which is of vital importance in process of interpreting. When the original text is output, the interpreter maximally follows the order of the original text to separate and reorganize it, to add or subtract words and make a series of other processing, and then outputs the translated text (Yang Ke & Hong Ye, 2020). Syntactic linearity requires interpreters to precisely divide the information they heard in the original text, reorganize it into sentences based on units of meaning or chunks of information, and subsequently link these sentences

together to ensure fluency (minimizing pause time), accuracy (the meaning of the translated text is error-free), and reasonability (the expression is in line with the conventions of the target language) (Yang Ke & Hong Ye, 2020).

The underlying principle of the syntactic linearity is sentence-constituent slicing. It involves sentence structure. Since linguistic typology focuses on the implied commonalities of structure patterns and word orders among different languages (Zhang Linsheng, 2013), it can be seen that linguistic typology provides a new perspective for the study of syntactic linearity. However, there are not many studies explaining interlinguistic translation strategies from the perspective of linguistic typology. And there are even fewer studies comparing the features of the word order and translation strategies in different languages together. Based on Greenberg's (1966) linguistic typological theoretical perspective, this paper seeks explanations for syntactic linearity by comparing and analyzing the features of declarative sentences in English and German, and explores how to adjust the syntactic structure of the English-German translation during the interpreting process to maximally ensure the fluency, accuracy, and reasonability of the language (Yang Ke & Hong Ye, 2020).

## 2. Analysis of the Word Order in Declarative Sentences

Traditional linguistic typology was established some 200 years ago. The German Schlegel brothers were the first to discover that the languages in the world are not entirely different, and that there existed certain common features within different languages. But they observed that there are significant differences in the way grammatical meanings were expressed in different languages. And based on this feature, they classified languages into inflectional language, agglutinative language, and isolating language. In contrast to traditional typology, which focuses on the morphology of a language, modern typology focuses on the grammatical types of a language, especially the word order types (Ming Ying, 2022).

Greenberg began studying synchronic linguistics in the late 1950s and published his paper *Some universals of grammar with particular reference to the order of meaningful elements* in 1963. He used the form of 'If there is an X structure in a language, there must be a Y structure' to record the language universals. He analyzed 30 languages to summarize six basic word orders in human languages, including: SOV, SVO, VSO, VOS, OVS, OSV. The characteristics of a language cannot be defined in isolation, but need to be analyzed by comparing with other languages. This section will concentrate on English as well as German word order in declarative sentences.

According to Zhang Linsheng's (2014) explanation for the dominant word order, the pattern of "agent + verb + patient" shows an "overwhelming trend" in English sentences. So to some extent, SVO is the dominant word order in English language. However, German is considered to be a language without a dominant or basic word order because its verb position varies in different sentence forms (Ming Ying, 2022).

## 2.1 *The Word Order of English Declarative Sentences*

### 2.1.1 The Basic Word Order

The idea that English is a typical SVO-type language (Greenberg, 1966) is hardly disputed in the academic community. Wang Cui (2011) categorized English as a language in which fixed and steady word order are in the majority. Because in English, the declension and conjugation, is less varied compared to the other inflectional languages such as Russian. It relies more on the word order for the determination of the grammatical meanings of the elements in the sentences. The basic order is as follow: S at the beginning of the sentence, followed by V, and finally O or iO (indirect object).

(1a) You eat the rice.

(1b) You give me a book.

The presence of other constituents, such as adverbial or attribute, does not affect the word order. It at most separates the SV or VO (Yu Shumin, 2022):

(1c) Story without an ending is not a good story.

(1d) She studies with great interest the foreign language.

It can be seen that the adjustability of sentence constituents is very limited. In other words, for English speakers, S must be before V, and V before O in the same way. The logic of the structure is “S > V > O”, the subject cannot be omitted, the agent cannot come after the verb, and the patient cannot come before the verb.

### 2.1.2 The Inverted Word Order

In spoken language, sometimes the object may be prepositioned for emphasis or other reasons:

(2a) The books like that, he’s always interesting in.

And some types of sentences will have such a structure in which the subject is placed after the verb. It’s generally a structure that uses the whole sentence to express a focus (the final point of the verb) to make the judgement (Song Wenhui, 2023):

(2b) There’re 6 persons in the room.

(2c) So do I.

But the dominant word order of English remains SVO.

## 2.2 *The Word Order of German Declarative Sentences*

Abraham (2020) stated that Germanic languages generally have grammatical subjects, but some of them are also well developed in topics such as in the case of German. It should be regarded as topic-prominent or discourse-constructed languages rather than subject-prominent languages. Thus, the word order in German is very variable. But German is unlike Russian. The position of each word in Russian is free, because the declension and conjugation have already determined the grammatical meaning of each word, the word order doesn’t matter. In German, even though the declension and conjugation also have already determined the meaning, the position of the word, especially of the verbs is fixed. On the other hand, the speaker can change the position of subject, object or adverbial etc., but

not the verb. Therefore, this regulation makes three main word orders in German declarative sentences.

### 2.2.1 The Normal Word Order (Die Grundstellung)

From the perspective of English native speakers, the word order of German can appear strange and complex (Zhou, Tianbing, 2013). Because of its fixed position of verbs but variable position of other constituents, Wang Cui (2011) classified German as a language with a majority of fixed and variable word order. The normal order in German is SVO, which corresponds to English:

(3a) Er schreibt seine Hausaufgabe.

(3b) Sie zeigt das Bild.

### 2.2.2 The Word Order with Two Verbs or a Separable Verb

Ming Ying (2022) argued that German cannot be categorized as an SVO language. Because in English sentences where there is a modal verb and a notional verb, the place of this two verbs are not separated, e.g., “She can eat ice-cream”. But in German, the two verbs will be placed in different positions, with the modal verb needing to be placed in the second position of the sentence (the second sentence constituent, not the second word). And the notional verb needs to be placed at the end of the sentence. Thus it derives a special word order from this type of construction—SVOV. This word order does not exist in the six basic word orders summarized by Greenberg (Ming Ying, 2022). Take the following sentence as an example:

(4a) Sie will im Winter Eiscreme essen.

Sentence frame (Zhou Tianbing, 2013) is a typical structure of German sentences. As in (4a), one verb is placed in the second position and another at the end of the sentence, forming a frame that wraps the object as well as the other constituents within it (Jin Xumin, 2023). The difference with English is that when the meaning of the sentence is very clear, the notional verb can be omitted:

(4b) Du kannst zu Julia (gehen).

As in (4b), “zu + person’s name” is clear that it means to go to someone, so the verb “gehen (to go)” can be omitted, whereas the expression “You can to Julia” does not occur in English.

There is also a type of verbs in German called “separable verbs”, which consists of a separable prefix and a stem, e.g., anschreiben, aufmachen, hereinkommen etc. If there is only a separable verb in the sentence, the stem needs to be placed in the second position of the sentence, while the separable prefix is placed at the end:

(5a) Ich schreibe am Papier 10 Wörter an.

(5b) Ich mache ohne sein Erlaubnis die Verpackung auf.

(5c) Sie kommt in ihr eigenes Zimmer herein.

Similar to (4a), the structure wraps the object and other constituents in sentence frame which is formed by the stem and the separable prefix. When there are two verbs in the sentence and the notional verb is separable, then the separable verb does not need to be separated and is placed at the end of the sentence:

(5d) Ich kann am Papier 10 Wörter anschreiben.

### 2.2.3 The Inverted Word order (Die Umstellung)

In German declarative sentences, there is an inverted word order as opposed to the normal word order, i.e., the subject is not placed first in the sentence. In the case of “Ich habe morgen eine Prüfung”, for example, the inverted word order for the object-front sentence would be:

(6a) Eine Prüfung habe ich morgen Vormittag.

It can also be other constituents, such as adverbial-front sentence:

(6b) Morgen Vormittag habe ich eine Prüfung.

When there are two verbs, the structure is same as (5d), but the first constituent is not the subject:

(6c) Eine Prüfung werde ich morgen Vormittag haben.

(6d) Morgen Vormittag werde ich eine Prüfung haben.

The word order of (6a) becomes OVS, and (6b) is a VSO-like order (according to Greenberg’s theory, no other constituent can precede the V in a standard VSO order). Inverted word order is very common in everyday life. If the speaker wants to emphasise a certain constituent, he or she will put the emphasised constituent in the first place in the sentence. And because of the German syntax that the verb has to be placed in the second position, it will not be expressed in the same way as in English: Tomorrow morning I will have an exam.

Because verbs and nouns in German have more conjugations and declensions than in English, the grammatical meaning of sentence constituents is not primarily determined by the order of the words. Instead, if it is not possible to determine the subject and object from the context and the conjugation and declension, the sentence is usually presented in normal word order, i.e., the subject is most likely to be in the first position in the sentence (Zhou Tianbing, 2013):

(7a) Die Hunde schlagen die Katzen.

(7b) Die Katzen schlagen die Hunde.

## 3. Selection of Syntactic Linearity Strategies Based on Word Order

In the interpreting scene, due to the limitation of the timeliness of translation and other factors, the syntactic linearity strategy is the basic principle. It aims at enabling the listener to make a reciprocal response to the speaker in time, i.e., the interpreter’s translation needs to be more favourable to the listener. In the process of interpreting, due to the difference in sentence structure, syntactic linearity sometimes does not go unimpeded. In this section, we will take English and German declarative sentences as an example to discuss the techniques of syntactic linearity.

The strategy selection for syntactic linearity is broadly based on the “Two-steps Method” namely “judging and then adjusting”:

“Judging”—As an interpreter, it is especially important to capture the first word of each sentence. Because the beginning of each sentence largely determines in what word order the sentence will appear

in next. If the subject appears at the beginning of the sentence, then according to the analysis in the previous section, English and German are likely to present it in the SVO order, and verb follows it generally. The second question at this point is how to quickly determine that the beginning of a sentence is the subject.

If the source language is English, according to the analyses of 1.1 and 1.2 in the previous section, the only word order is SVO, except for inverted sentences; and if other types of declarative sentences appear in inverted word order, there is bound to be a pause between the front part and the subject.

If the source language is German and the first word of the sentence is a noun or pronoun, then it is necessary to determine whether it is the subject or object. Usually, if it has an article or adjective, the interpreter can determine this from the declension of them. However, in some cases it is not possible to determine from the article or adjective, or even there's none of them, it is necessary to continue to listen the speaker and determine it from the conjugation of the verb.

“Adjusting”—After judging the structure of the sentence, the interpreter can make adjustments to the sentence structure. And the so-called adjustment of the word order, that is, of all the reasonable sentence structures mentioned in the previous section, seek the one that is most similar to the original text. The languages with larger margins for word order adjustment should have the priority. That is to say, if the original text is in English, the German interpreter can follow the English word order to adjust the structure, and then adopt amplification omission to improve the acceptability of the translation. If the original text is German, the word order is more flexible than English, and the order of the English translation may be difficult to fully match the German. Therefore, interpreters should pay attention to the special sentence structure of German, adjust the sequence of the translated text appropriately, and try to make the English translation basically match the German text.

### *3.1 Translation for Declarative Sentences of Similar Word Order or Structure*

In general, the English basic order can correspond to the German subject-verb-object namely the normal order. These two kinds of word orders are SVO, such as “I buy a skirt” and “Ich kaufe einen Rock”. No matter which language is used as the source language, the interpreter can quickly come up with a corresponding translation.

### *3.2 Translation for Declarative Sentences of Different Word Order or Structure*

However, in some cases, the word order or structure in the source language does not exist in the target language. So interpreters have to think more carefully when translating such sentences. Techniques also differ when the source language is different.

#### *3.2.1 English as Source Language*

Some sentences in English are not found in German. We take existential sentence “She will go to the cinema with her friends” as an example, German translation:

(8a) Sie wird mit ihren Freunden ins Kino gehen.

(8b) Mit ihren Freunden wird sie ins Kino gehen.

(8c) Ins Kino wird sie mit ihren Freunden gehen.

(8d) Sie wird ins Kino gehen mit ihren Freunden.

(8e) Sie wird ins Kino mit ihren Freunden.

The original text is a sentence in which two verbs appear and the notional verb follows the modal verb. As mentioned in the previous section, in German, if two verbs appear in a sentence, the modal verb must be placed in the second position and the notional verb at the end. (8a)-(8c) are most used in daily life and they emphasize different constituent, but the positions of the verbs clearly do not fit the word order of the original text. So one of the grammars in German—the exclusion (die Ausklammerung)—should be told. Exclusion can be divided into grammatical and rhetorical type, i.e., the verb at the end of the sentence is placed at a preceding position. Grammatical exclusion: comparative sentences with “wie” and “als”; infinitives with “zu”; appearance of identical constituent of a sentence, e.g., apposition; longer prepositional phrases. Rhetorical exclusion: shorter prepositional phrases. According to common expressions, (8a)-(8c) are all not the exclusion constructions. And rhetorical exclusion can be used for this by placing one of the prepositional phrases after the notional verb, resulting in (8d). However, the word order still fails to match the original exactly. So in line with the above chapter, German would have (8e) if the prepositional group already specifies the meaning of the notional verb, which can be omitted. The word order of (8e) matches the original while at the same time conforming to the listener’s conventions, and is therefore the best translation.

### 3.2.2 German as Source Language

In German, although the word order is SVO in most cases, there exists a more varied word order than in English.

#### 3.2.2.1 Translation for the Word Order with Two Verbs

The separation of two or more verbs does not exist in English. Therefore, if German is used as the original language, it can be very challenging for English translators. Take “Ich habe alle meine Hausaufgaben geschafft” as an example:

(9) I finished all my homework.

In English, the word order namely SVO cannot be changed because it mainly relies on word order to express grammatical meaning. In the original text, there are two verbs, and the notional verb is at the end of the sentence (the perfect tense in German is equivalent to the past sense expressed in the English). And the English interpreter has difficulty with this type of sentence, so he or she can only speed up his or her speech in order to reduce the time difference between the original text and the translated text.

#### 3.2.2.2 Translation for the Inverted Word Order

In German, when the object or other constituent is placed at the first position, the subject must be placed behind the verb. But English relies too much on the order of words to characterize the relationship between subject and object, and the translation of the German inverted word order into English is also a

problem that is not easy to deal with. Take “Diese Vase putze ich jeden Tag” as an example:

(10a) I clean this vase everyday.

(10b) This vase, I clean it everyday.

In German, if the first position of the sentence is not the subject but the object or some other constituent, then they are the constituents that the speaker wants to emphasize. The inverted order does not exist in English. (10a) is the most common expression used in life, but it is a clear mismatch with the word order of original text. However, in spoken English, it is also possible to put the emphasized constituent in the front, use a comma to separate, and then start another sentence with “it” as the formal object, which would result in (10b). Although the word order still fails to match the original text, it is a better translation because the time gap of information output is obviously narrowed compared with (10a), and it is more in line with the listener’s habit.

#### 4. Conclusion

Overall, syntactic linearity is an effective interpreting strategy. It allows interpreters to flexibly adjust the sentence structure of the translated language while maintaining the order of information in the source language in order to achieve fast and accurate translation. Although both English and German belong to a same language group, there are significant differences to construct sentences and convey information in actual use. English word order is relatively fixed, while German word order is more flexible. In the process of interpreting, syntactic linearity may lead to loss of information. Therefore, interpreters need to flexibly use the “Two-steps method” according to the characteristics of the source language and the translated language. And the syntactic linearity allows that the languages with larger margins for word order adjustment should have the priority, which can ensure the fluency, accuracy and legality of the language in the process of interpreting to the greatest extent.

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