

Why German is not an SVO-language but an SOV-language with V2

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Abstract

This paper¹ will take as its starting point the widely assumed distinction between SVO-languages and SOV-languages, with a particular focus on German as compared to English and to Danish. It will be argued that German (and Dutch, Frisian and Old English) is an SOV-language whereas Danish and English (and Icelandic) are SVO-languages, even though several orders may be found inside each of these languages. It will also be shown where the verb second (V2) property fits in, which is common to German and Danish (and Old English), but only found in (present-day) English to a much smaller extent.

The differences between this analysis and two other analyses will also be discussed, namely the analysis in Greenberg (1963) and Bohn (1983) that both German and English are SVO-languages, and the analysis in Bohn (2003) that German is SVO in main clauses but SOV in subordinate clauses.

1. Is German SVO or SOV?

I will take my starting point in Greenberg's (1963, p. 109) discussion of "basic word order", by which he means the "dominant" order of the

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subject, the **verb** and the **object**. Establishing the basic word order of a particular language is not as easy as it may sound. Danish, e.g., allows at least four different orders:²

- S V O
- (1) a. Hvis Ocke bruger det her program, ...
If Ocke uses this here programme, ...
 = ‘If Ocke uses this programme, ...’
- O V S
- b. Det her program bruger Ocke.
This here programme uses Ocke.
 = ‘This programme Ocke uses.’
- V S O
- c. Bruger Ocke det her program?
Uses Ocke this here programme?
 = ‘Does Ocke use this programme?’
- O S V
- d. Jeg ved ikke hvad for et program Ocke bruger.
I know not what for a programme Ocke uses.
 = ‘I don’t know which programme Ocke uses.’

Now the question is which of these four should be chosen as the basic order of Danish. Here I agree with Greenberg’s (1963, p. 109) suggestion that the basic order of Danish is **Subject-Verb-Object**, as in (1a). However, although I agree with Greenberg on what the basic order is, I do not agree with him as to why this should be so.

Greenberg (1963, p. 109) puts **all** the Germanic languages into the same group, i.e. **SVO**, and similarly Bohn (1983, p. 75) analyses both English and German as SVO-languages.³

² All examples in this paper have been constructed and checked with native speakers, with two obvious exceptions: Examples (3d) and (11d), which were constructed by Johanna Wood.

³ I should hasten to add that Bohn (1983, p. 75) explicitly says that he is only concerned with main clauses with a finite main verb. This limitation will be discussed in more detail in section 4 below.

I find it more promising to classify only Scandinavian and English as SVO, (2), and to take the basic order of German, Dutch and Frisian (and by extension also Old English) to have the object before the verb, i.e. to classify these three languages as Subject-Object-Verb, SOV, (3):

(2) SVO		verb	object
a.	Danish	Jeg har læst	bogen.
b.	Icelandic	Ég hef lesið	bókina.
c.	English	I have read	the book.

(3) SOV			object	verb
a.	Dutch	Ik heb	het boek	gelezen.
b.	Frisian	Ik ha	it boekje	lêzen.
c.	German	Ich habe	das Buch	gelesen.
d.	Old English	Ic habe	þa boc	gereded.

I have the book read

(The analysis of Dutch, Frisian, German and Old English as SOV-languages goes back to Bach, 1962, Bierwisch, 1963, and Koster, 1975).

Why does Greenberg (1963, p. 109) categorise German as SVO and why does Bohn (1983, p. 75) say that German has SVO order? Neither of them go into any great detail, but they both talk about the “dominant word order” (Greenberg, 1963, p. 76, 109; Bohn, 1983, p. 75).

Whaley (1997, p. 106), a textbook in descriptive comparative linguistics, is more explicit about why he also takes SVO to be the “basic constituent order” of German. He takes an order to be the basic constituent order if it tends to be “strongly felt to be the basic order by native speakers”, if it tends to be “the most frequent order”, “the least marked order”, or the “pragmatically most neutral order”. The reference is thus to tendency rather than to theory.

The classification of German as SOV that I want to advocate here has a theoretical basis: If one order is declared to be the basic order, then all other possible orders have to be accounted for relative to the basic order. The objective is thus to find the order from which all the actually occurring orders can be derived in the least complex way, i.e. necessitating the minimal number of additional rules and exceptions.

Consider therefore first the complications involved in deriving the various orders if we follow Greenberg (1963, p. 109), Bohn (1983, p. 75), and Whaley (1997, p. 103) in taking the basic order of German to be SVO:

Taking the basic order to be SVO

(4) Main clauses (subject-initial)

a.	Ocke <u>hält</u> gerade einen Vortrag. <i>Ocke gives just now a talk</i>	no movement required
b.	Ocke hat ___ gestern einen Vortrag <u>gehalten</u> . <i>Ocke has yesterday a talk given</i>	past participle moved to the right
c.	Ocke wird ___ morgen einen Vortrag <u>halten</u> . <i>Ocke will tomorrow a talk give</i>	infinitive moved to the right
d.	Ocke wird ___ morgen einen Vortrag <u>gehalten haben</u> . <i>Ocke will tomorrow a talk given have</i>	past participle + infinitive moved to the right
e.	Ocke fängt ___ gerade einen Vortrag <u>an</u> . <i>Ocke begins just now a talk PRT</i>	separable prefix moved to the right
f.	Ocke wird ___ morgen einen Vortrag <u>anfangen</u> . <i>Ocke will tomorrow a talk PRT-begin</i>	separable prefix + infinitive moved to the right

(5) Embedded clauses

a.	... weil Ocke ___ gerade einen Vortrag <u>hält</u> . <i>... because Ocke just now a talk gives</i>	finite verb moved to the right
b.	... weil Ocke ___ ___ gestern einen Vortrag <u>gehalten hat</u> . <i>... because Ocke yesterday a talk given has</i>	past participle + finite verb moved to the right
c.	... weil Ocke ___ ___ morgen einen Vortrag <u>halten wird</u> . <i>... because Ocke tomorrow a talk give will</i>	infinitive + finite verb moved to the right
d.	... weil Ocke ___ ___ morgen einen Vortrag <u>gehalten haben wird</u> . <i>... because Ocke tomorrow a talk given have will</i>	past participle + infinitive + finite verb moved to the right
e.	... weil Ocke ___ ___ gerade einen Vortrag <u>anfängt</u> . <i>... because Ocke just now a talk PRT-begins</i>	separable prefix + finite verb moved to the right
f.	... weil Ocke ___ ___ morgen einen Vortrag <u>anfangen wird</u> . <i>... because Ocke tomorrow a talk PRT-begin will</i>	separable prefix + infinitive + finite verb moved to the right

(6) Non-subject-initial main clauses

a.	<u>Gestern hat</u> Ocke ___ einen Vortrag <u>gehalten</u> . <i>Yesterday has Ocke a talk given</i>	adverbial moved to the left + finite verb moved to the left + past participle moved to the right
b.	<u>Einen Vortrag hat</u> Ocke ___ gestern ___ <u>gehalten</u> . <i>A talk has Ocke yesterday given</i>	object moved to the left + finite verb moved to the left + past participle moved to the right

To get from a basic SVO order to the various word orders actually found in German, a considerable number of different movements would have to be assumed. (4) shows that not only do all non-finite verbal forms (and separable prefixes = separable verb particles) have to be moved to the right in main clauses (as stated explicitly in e.g. Lass 1987, p. 328), but it also has to be assured that all of these non-finite verbal forms (and separable prefixes) occur in the mirror image order of the one they would have had if they had not moved (as seen from their order in e.g. Danish or English: Danish *Lyset må være₁ gået₂ ud₃* = English *The light must have₁ gone₂ out₃* = German *Das Licht muss aus₃gegangen₂ sein₁*).⁴ The exact same is true of embedded clauses, except that here also the finite verb would have to be moved to the right, as seen in (5). Finally, notice also that even though the basic order has the verb before the object, it is nevertheless also necessary to assume a movement that moves a finite verb to the **left** to account for (6) in addition to a movement that moves a finite verb to the **right** to account for (5).

Consider now how much less complicated the derivation is if the basic order of German is taken to be SOV (adapted from Wöllstein-Leisten et al., 1997, pp. 28-32, see also Vikner, 2001, pp. 87-124; 2005, 2007):

Taking the basic order to be SOV

(7) Subject-initial main clauses - same data as (4)

a.	Ocke <u>hält</u> gerade einen Vortrag ____. ↑ <i>Ocke gives just now a talk</i>	finite verb moved to the left
b.	Ocke <u>hat</u> gestern einen Vortrag gehalten ____. ↑ <i>Ocke has yesterday a talk given</i>	finite verb moved to the left
c.	Ocke <u>wird</u> morgen einen Vortrag halten ____. ↑ <i>Ocke will tomorrow just now a talk give</i>	finite verb moved to the left
d.	Ocke <u>wird</u> morgen einen Vortrag gehalten haben ____. ↑ <i>Ocke will tomorrow a talk given have</i>	finite verb moved to the left
e.	Ocke <u>fängt</u> gerade einen Vortrag an ____. ↑ <i>Ocke begins just now a talk PRT</i>	finite verb moved to the left
f.	Ocke <u>wird</u> morgen einen Vortrag anfangen ____. ↑ <i>Ocke will tomorrow a talk PRT-begin</i>	finite verb moved to the left

⁴ Given that a number of different verbal forms plus a separable prefix may move, under the SVO-analysis, an answer also has to be found why they all have to move in (4), with one notable exception: the finite verb. If it is possible to move only *gehalten* in (4b), why is it not possible to move only *gehalten* in (4d)? Similarly, if it is possible to move only *an* in (4e), why is it not possible to move only *an* in (4f)?

(8) Embedded clauses - same data as (5)		
a.	... weil Ocke gerade einen Vortrag <u>hält</u> because Ocke just now a talk gives	no movement required
b.	... weil Ocke gestern einen Vortrag gehalten <u>hat</u> because Ocke yesterday a talk given has	no movement required
c.	... weil Ocke morgen einen Vortrag halten <u>wird</u> because Ocke tomorrow a talk give will	no movement required
d.	... weil Ocke morgen einen Vortrag gehalten haben <u>wird</u> because Ocke tomorrow a talk given have will	no movement required
e.	... weil Ocke gerade einen Vortrag <u>anfängt</u> because Ocke just now a talk PRT-begins	no movement required
f.	... weil Ocke morgen einen Vortrag anfangen <u>wird</u> because Ocke tomorrow a talk PRT-begin will	no movement required

(9) Non-subject-initial main clauses - same data as (6)		
a.	Gestern <u>hat</u> Ocke ___ einen Vortrag gehalten ___. Yesterday has Ocke a talk given	adverbial moved to the left + finite verb moved to the left
b.	<u>Einen Vortrag</u> <u>hat</u> Ocke gestern ___ gehalten ___. A talk has Ocke yesterday given	object moved to the left + finite verb moved to the left

To get from a basic SOV order to the various word orders actually found in German, a relatively small number of different movements will have to be assumed. Notice e.g. that a finite verb is only ever moved to the left, (7) and (9), never to the right and notice also that no other verbal forms or separable prefixes need to move to account for the data in (7) and (9). Sound theoretical reasoning thus clearly supports the assumption that German (and Dutch, Frisian and Old English) are SOV-languages, not SVO.

2. Aux-VP vs. VP-aux the across Germanic languages

The advantage of making a distinction between Scandinavian and English as SVO and Dutch, Frisian, German and Old English as SOV is that it allows a number of further empirical generalisations to be made. One such empirical generalisation is that Germanic SVO-languages always put the finite auxiliary verb, e.g. *have* in (10)/(11), to the left of the verb phrase (VP)⁵ in embedded clauses, (10), whereas Germanic SOV-languages most

⁵ The assumption behind VP is that just like a preposition together with its complement, e.g. *mit seinem Betreuer / with his supervisor*, forms a preposition phrase (PP), a verb together with its complement, e.g. *dieses Buch lesen / read this book*, forms a verb phrase (VP). This is supported by the observation that VPs can occur in different positions in the clause:

- (i) Ich hätte [dieses Buch gelesen], wenn ich die Zeit gehabt hätte.
I would-have this book read, if I the time had would-have
- (ii) [Dieses Buch gelesen] hätte ich, wenn ich die Zeit gehabt hätte.
This book read would-have I, if I the time had would-have

often (but not exclusively) put the finite auxiliary verb to the right of the VP in embedded clauses, (11):

(10)	SVO			aux	VP
a.	Danish	... fordi	jeg	har	læst bogen.
b.	Icelandic	... af því að	ég	hef	lesið bókina.
c.	English	... because	I	have	read the book.

(11)	SOV			VP	aux
a.	Dutch	... omdat	ik	het boek gelezen	heb.
b.	Frisian	... om't	ik	it boekje lêzen	ha.
c.	German	... weil	ich	das Buch gelesen	habe.
d.	Old English	... forðan	ic	þa boc gereded	habe.

... because I the book read have

This empirical generalisation can be formulated as follows:

- (12) **SVO** languages only have **aux-VP**,
 whereas only **SOV** languages may have **VP-aux**.

From this we can e.g. derive the prediction that if a Germanic language has VO order as in English (i.e. the main verb *read* before the object *the book*), it will **not** have **VP-aux** order (i.e. *read the book* before *have*). In other words, we predict that no Germanic language can have the order ... *because I read the book have*.

3. Verb second (V2)

A potential problem with this difference in basic word order between German and Danish is that it might now seem as if these two languages are much more different than they “really” are. However, even though this analysis says that they have different basic word orders (German is SOV, Danish SVO), they still have other central properties in common, e.g. verb second (V2): As shown for Danish in (13) and for German in (14) (see also (9) above), the finite verb in main clauses in both languages moves into the second position and some other constituent, e.g. an adverbial, the object

Notice furthermore that if the existence of VPs as constituents is assumed, this is not compatible with the existence as a constituent of a “verb group” consisting of only verbs (i.e. *hätte* and *gelesen* in (i) and (ii)), as assumed by Bohn (1983, p. 80). This point is discussed in more detail in Vikner (2016), in particular the abundant evidence for VP as a constituent (including (i) and (ii)) and the absence of evidence for the verb group as a constituent.

or the subject⁶ moves into the first position. In generative linguistics, the first position is called CP-spec and the second position C°, cf. e.g. Vikner (1995, pp. 41-46) or Vikner & Jørgensen (2017, p. 163).

(13)	①	②		
a.	<u>I morgen</u> ₁ <i>Tomorrow</i>	<u>vil</u> ₂ <i>will</i>	Ocke ____ ₂ holde et foredrag ____ ₁ . <i>Ocke give a talk</i>	adverbial to ① + finite verb to ②
b.	<u>Et foredrag</u> ₁ <i>A talk</i>	<u>vil</u> ₂ <i>will</i>	Ocke ____ ₂ holde ____ ₁ i morgen. <i>Ocke give tomorrow</i>	object to ① + finite verb to ②
c.	<u>Ocke</u> ₁ <i>Ocke</i>	<u>vil</u> ₂ <i>will</i>	____ ₁ ____ ₂ holde et foredrag i morgen. <i>give a talk tomorrow</i>	subject to ① + finite verb to ②

(14)	①	②		
a.	<u>Morgen</u> ₁ <i>Tomorrow</i>	<u>wird</u> ₂ <i>will</i>	Ocke ____ ₁ einen Vortrag halten ____ ₂ . <i>Ocke a talk give</i>	adverbial to ① + finite verb to ②
b.	<u>Einen</u> <u>Vortrag</u> ₁ <i>A talk</i>	<u>wird</u> ₂ <i>will</i>	Ocke morgen ____ ₁ halten ____ ₂ . <i>Ocke tomorrow give</i>	object to ① + finite verb to ②
c.	<u>Ocke</u> ₁ <i>Ocke</i>	<u>wird</u> ₂ <i>will</i>	____ ₁ morgen einen Vortrag halten ____ ₂ . <i>tomorrow a talk give</i>	subject to ① + finite verb to ②

I would therefore like to suggest the typological classification that both Danish and German are V2, even though the basic word order in Danish is SVO and the one in German SOV. On the other hand, Danish and English have in common that they both have SVO as the basic word order, but English is not V2 (as opposed to Danish and to German and Old English), as can be seen from the fact that the English version of e.g. (13a)/(14a) does not have the finite verb in the second position left of the subject, but in the third position right of the subject:

(15) Tomorrow, Ocke will give a talk.

4. Can a language be both SVO and SOV?

When Bohn (1983, p. 75) takes both English and German to be SVO-languages, he also says that he is only concerned with main clauses with a finite main verb. Furthermore, when Bohn (1983, p. 80) says that English and German have in common that “the auxiliary verb occurs before the

⁶ In fact, (14c) shows that the analysis given in (7) above was strongly simplified. All main clauses in German, also the subject-initial ones in (7) and (14c), are the result of **two** movements: The finite verb moves to the second position and the subject (or object or adverbial or ...) moves to the first position. The same is true for all the other Germanic V2 languages, including Danish and Old English.

main verb in declarative structures”, he is presumably still only talking about main clauses with only one auxiliary verb (as otherwise (4d)/(7d) and (5a-f)/(8a-f) above would be counterexamples).

Explicitly or implicitly limiting the SVO-analysis of German to main clauses in this way raises the question of whether a language can have more than one basic word order, i.e. whether a language can have one basic word order in some circumstances and another basic word order in others.

Where Bohn (1983) simply says nothing about the basic word order in embedded clauses, this might seem to be different in Bohn (2003), a set of lecture notes from a course on the history of the English language, based to a large extent on Lass (1987). However, when Bohn (2003, p. 15) says that German is “verb-second in main clauses, verb-final in subordinate clauses”, it is not 100% clear that he commits himself to the account that German has one basic word order in main clauses (SVO) and another (SOV) in embedded clauses.

Even so, I find it worthwhile to briefly discuss such a view (i.e. that German has one basic word order in main clauses (SVO) and another (SOV) in embedded clauses), also in order to underline that it is no accident that for a language to have more than one basic word order is neither possible in Greenberg’s (1963, pp. 77, 108-110) analysis, nor in the analysis advocated in the present paper.

Admittedly, one advantage of an analysis that says that the basic word order in German (or Dutch or Frisian or Old English) is SVO in main clauses but SOV in embedded ones is that it would replace (5) with (8) above as the analysis of embedded clauses, which is clearly a simplification. However, such an analysis would retain the very non-uniform account of main clauses in (4) and (6), where not only all non-finite verbal forms (and separable prefixes) are moved to the right, but where it also has to be assured that all of these non-finite verbal forms (and separable prefixes) occur in mirror image order, as compared to their order in English or Danish. If instead, as was suggested in (7), (9) and (14) above, also main clauses were to be seen as SOV, the positions of all verbal forms (and separable prefixes) would follow assuming one single additional movement, that of the finite verb to the second position of the main clause. Put differently, compared to SVO-languages like Danish and English, German differs not only in embedded clauses, but crucially also in main clauses. In other words, a dual basic word order analysis of German (SVO in main clauses, SOV in embedded ones) would be an improvement over the analysis of German as

generally SVO only as far as embedded clauses are concerned, and not at all where main clauses are concerned.

Another argument against assuming a dual basic word order analysis of German is that it violates Occam's razor, as it allows more options than are necessary. To be more concrete, given that we need a way of deriving V2 (see section 3 above) independently of German (and of Dutch, Frisian and Old English), because such a derivation is needed for SVO V2 languages like Danish, (13), we might as well use that same derivation for V2 in German. As this will in turn obviate the need for allowing for a dual SOV/SVO option, so that we only need to allow for the simplex SOV option and the simplex SVO option, the preferable analysis has to be one that does not allow for the dual option to begin with, but only for the two simplex ones. Of course, Occam's razor only prohibits extra options (and extra assumptions) if they are not strictly necessary, and so it remains to be seen whether there are other languages in the world where the dual SOV/SVO option is the only possible analysis. I have merely argued here that this is not the case within the Germanic languages, but as the World Atlas of Language Structures Online (Dryer, 2013) lists a total of 189 "languages lacking a dominant order", only three of which are Germanic (viz. German, Dutch and Frisian), it remains to be seen whether any of the other 186 ones might require the dual SOV/SVO option and not be amenable to alternative and more restrictive derivations.

5. Conclusion

The distinction between SVO-languages and SOV-languages made by Greenberg (1963), Bohn (1983) and many many others was argued to be a very useful distinction, even more so if it is put on a solid theoretical and empirical footing, rather than just being a tendency. More concretely, the SVO-SOV-distinction was used to account for a number of very basic and common differences between English and Danish (and Icelandic) on one hand and German (and Dutch, Frisian and Old English) on the other. The resulting account was argued to be clearly preferable to accounts where all of the Germanic languages are taken to be SVO-languages, such as Greenberg (1963, p. 109) and Bohn (1983, p. 75).

The verb second (V2) property was shown to play a crucial role in this account. It was also shown how other generalisations concerning the Germanic languages could make reference to the SVO-SOV-distinction. Finally, it was argued to be desirable not to allow any languages to be both SOV and SVO.

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