A COMPARISON OF SENTENCE PATTERNS
IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN

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This paper is an attempt, in the area of contrastive linguistics, to say something descriptively interesting about the structure of English and German, while at the same time providing some help for the language practitioner—the coursebook writer and translator, rather than the language teacher.

It is not a common feature of English grammars for them to contain a list of the basic sentence patterns in the language, at least not in any systematic fashion. Zandvoort’s *Handbook of English grammar* (1972), for example, makes no attempt at such a list. The more recently written *Grammar of contemporary English* (Quirk et al 1979) does contain a list of the 7 basic clause types in English (p. 343), but one has to go to the chapter on verb complementation to fill this list out in any way. Similarly, C. C. Fries’s *Structure of English* (1952) lists ten sentence formulas for English, without any expansion. And E. A. Nida in *A Synopsis of English syntax* (1960) makes a listing, but one which is very confused and unsystematic.

In the context of EFL, however, some attempt has been made towards listing the basic sentence patterns, notably by A. S. Hornby. He lists 25 ‘verb patterns’, many with two or more variants, in his *Guide to patterns and usage in English* (1954), and this list has been carried through with revisions to the 3rd edition of the *Oxford advanced Learner’s dictionary of current English* (1974). The main criticism of Hornby’s list is the unsystematic nature of his analyses of sentences and of his use of grammatical terms; for example, the sentence “We congratulated him on his success” (Verb Pattern 14) is analysed as: Subject + vt (We congratulated), DO (him), prep (on), Noun phrase/clause (his success). This confuses functional terms like DO (= direct object) with categorial terms like Noun indiscriminately.
Turning to German grammars, here one frequently finds a list of the sentence patterns (Satzbaupläne). For example, the Duden grammar has such a list, containing some 23 ‘Hauptpläne’ (1973:498). I have two main criticisms of the Duden list: 1. the element labelled ‘Art ergänzung’ conflates two distinct sentence elements, on the one hand the manner adverb as in “Er verhält sich einwandfrei”, and on the other hand the predicative adjective in an intensive relation with the subject (cf. Quirk et al 1973:446-7) as in “Diese Aenderung erscheint wünschenswert”; 2. more importantly, the Duden scheme ignores Nominal Clauses as sentence elements, i.e. dass-clause, w-clause, inf.-clause, e.g. “Er hat vorgeschlagen, ins Kino zu gehen”. This follows the practice of a number of German linguists who have discussed sentence patterns — Erben, Engel, Heringer — who argue that nominal clauses should be treated as elements substituting for noun phrases. There are two arguments against this position: 1. terms like ‘inf.-clause’ and ‘that-clause’ are grammatically of the same kind as ‘noun phrase’, they are both categorial elements that may operate at a particular functional position, Subject or Object; 2. There are some verbs that take only a nominal clause as Object, and never a noun phrase, e.g. in English ‘aim’ in the sense ‘intend’ takes an inf.-clause, but not an NPO.

A German grammar which contains a fairly comprehensive list of sentence patterns is the Heibig/Buscha Deutsche Grammatik, Ein Handbuch für den Ausländerunterricht (Leipzig 1974). It lists 97 ‘satzmodelle’, and it includes nominal clauses among the sentence elements recognized. Perhaps the criticism that could be made of it is that there is no differentiation between sentence patterns that are central and those that are marginal or of limited occurrence, e.g. im Adj Inf (“Der Mann hat gut reifen”).

What, then, are the sentence patterns of a language? They are the simple, non-passive, affirmative, declarative sentences, and they illustrate the range of combinations of sentence elements that are possible in a language. The topic has most frequently been treated in the context of Dependency Grammar (and Valency Theory), which views the verb as the chief element in the sentence. The verb is then regarded as determining the number and nature of the other sentence elements, i.e. the elements that are dependent on the verb, as ‘complements’ — to ‘complete’ the grammar or the sense of a sentence. So, the sentence patterns represent the possible patterning of complements in a language.

The question about sentence patterns resolves itself into a question about verbal complements. Not all elements in a sentence may be complements — only those that are directly dependent on the verb. For example, in the sentence “Jim keeps the car in the garage”, ‘in the garage’ is a complement, but in “Jim washes the car in the garage”, it is not. ‘In the garage’ may be deleted from the second without affecting the grammatical completeness;
German but not in English, and the other two concern features present in English that are not in German.

1. Case in German. This is perhaps the most obvious difference. The most usual case for NP0 in German is the accusative, but dative and genitive may also occur. Genitive is very rare, being replaced by prepositional constructions, but it still persists with a few reflexive verbs — pattern G22 (e.g. 'sich bedienen', 'sich enthalten'), and in ditransitive constructions (G43), e.g. 'berauben', 'beschuldigen', 'bezeichneten'. The dative is more frequent as the case of NP0. And the ditransitive pattern 'S V dat NPacc' (G44) is equivalent to the English 'S V NP NP' (E32) and not the German pattern 'S V NPacc NPacc' (G43), which occurs with only one NP ('lehren', 'kosten'). There is another pattern in which two NPs occur in the accusative — G67 — but here the second NP is in an intensive relation with the first, i.e. it refers to the same 'thing'. NP's in an intensive relation are in the same case, e.g. G3, where both S and NP are in the nominative case. This means that intensive sentences are formally distinguishable from transitive sentences in German, whereas this not the case in English. Case marking also has the effect of increasing the number of sentence patterns in German.

2. Reflexives. I have used two symbols to indicate reflexive constructions in German: 'NP(s)' and 'sich'. 'NP(s)' refers to genuine semantic reflexives, whereas an agent performs an action on himself, which in most cases could have been performed by someone else, e.g. 'Er wäscht sich', 'Es betrachtet sich', 'Er bringt sich um'. 'Sich' refers to other cases. English, for the most part, has only cases of 'NP(s)'. Verbs taking reflexive pronouns may nearly always take an NP referring to a third person as well. There is a small number of exceptions, e.g. 'perjure oneself', 'pride oneself'. Those which refer to actions that could not be performed on a third person but only on oneself.

The 'sich' cases in German may be of two general types. On the one hand, there are the 'reflexive verbs', which just so happen to be formed with the reflexive pronoun. For the most part, they refer to actions of a 'personal' nature, e.g. 'sich ärgern', 'sich schämen', 'sich freuen', 'sich küssen'. The majority are verbs which take prepositional objects (G24), but a few are formed with 'NPacc', 'NPdat' (G20—22). On the other hand, the reflexive construction (particularly G11) is used as a 'middle voice' construction in German. German, like English, also uses the 'S V' pattern as a middle voice, e.g. 'Er brennt das Holz an — Das Holz brennt an'. 'He is burning the wood — The wood is burning'. But more frequently, German uses the 'S V sich' pattern for the middle voice, e.g. 'Man hat die Situation geändert — Die Situation hat sich geändert', 'Man hat die Preise verdoppelt — Die Preise haben sich verdoppelt'. Indeed, this seems to be the main function of the pattern G11; there are few intransitive reflexive verbs.

3. 'Da(r)-prep + Nominal Clause'. This refers to patterns G30, G32, G34, G36, etc. It reflects the possibility in German of including the preposition of prepositional verbs/objects when the object is a nominal clause. This is a regular possibility with all nominal clause constructions in German, but 'da(r)-prep' is in some cases optional. In English, the most common nominal clause construction with a preposition is the 'prepositional-clause' (E30), which is frequently the equivalent of German 'da(r)-prep zu-inf-cl' (G38), e.g. 'He insists on getting up early' — 'Er besteht darauf, früh aufzustehen'. In English a preposition may also occur with a 'wh-clause' (E28), and it may occur with anticipatory 'it' with a 'that-clause' (E24), though this has limited use and sounds forced in English. Otherwise, verbs with prepositional objects in English leave out the preposition when the object is a nominal clause, e.g. 'He dreamed about his wedding' — 'He dreamed about getting married' — 'He dreamed that he got married'.

4. English 'ing-clause'. There is no direct equivalent of this construction in German. In English, it occurs in mono-transitive structures with and without preposition (E28—30), in ditransitive structures only with a preposition (E37), and in complex-transitive structures only without a preposition (E46). In many cases of English, the mono-transitive use is interchangeable with a 'to-inf-clause', and it seems to be most frequently translated into German by a 'zu-inf-clause', e.g. 'He has started learning German' — 'Er hat angefangen, Deutsch zu lernen'.

Here is probably the appropriate point to give some explanation of the difference between the complex-to-transitive and complex-transitive structures, since this also affects our fifth contrast. In ditransitive structures there are two object participants involved, both of which may be questioned:

e.g. 'Jim asked him whether the train had left'
   'Jim asked him to leave the room'
   'Jim asked him about coming to lunch'
   'Who did Jim ask?'
   'What did Jim ask him?'

In complex-transitive structures only one object is involved, which has a complex structure, so that only one question parallel to those above is possible:

e.g. 'Jim prefers us to call in the evening'
   'Who does Jim prefer?'
   'What'
   'What does Jim prefer us?'
   'Jim saw him cleaning the windows'
   'Who did Jim see?'
   'What'
   'What did Jim see him?'
And a set of slightly different cases:

"Jim forced him to come to lunch"

- "(+) Who did Jim force?"
- "What"
- "(+) What did Jim force him (to do)?"

"Jim caught him stealing the apples"

- "(+) Who did Jim catch?"
- "What"
- "(+) What did Jim catch him (doing)?"

In English, it appears that the 'NP -ing-clause' pattern is ditransitive if the 'ing-clause' is introduced by a preposition, but complex-transitive if not (E37, 46).

5. Complex-transitive patterns with non-finite nominal clauses (E44-6). Pattern E44 contains verbs of both the 'force' kind and the 'prefer' kind; the former have more affinity with di-transitive structures, the latter with mono-transitive. The 'force' kind of structures are derived in transformational grammar by means of the 'Equi-NP deletion' transformation, i.e. the NP ('him' in "Jim forced him to come for lunch") is considered to represent both the object in the matrix clause and the subject in the embedded clause: "Jim forced him (him to come for lunch)", cf. Akmajian & Hovy 1975: Ch. 9.

It seems that the situation is somewhat different in German. Most of the verbs of the 'force' kind I have included among the di-transitives, since both elements may be questioned:

e.g. "warnen" — "Er warnte mich davor, mit diesem Mann zu sprechen" (G52)
- "Wen hat er gewarnt?"
- "Wovor hat er (mich) gewarnt?"
- "zwängen" — "Er zwang mich dazu, ihm zu Mittag zu essen"
- "Wen hat er gezwängen?"
- "Wozu hat er (mich) gezwängen?"

Both these verbs are, then, prepositional in German, which makes the boundaries between the constituents clear. They may be made prepositional in English: "He warned me against speaking to that man"

"He forced me into lunching with him"

and take 'ing-clauses'. In these cases it is difficult to know whether to include the 'force' group in English under the di-transitive or the complex-transitive patterns.

Verbs of the 'prefer' kind, however — 'prefer', 'want', 'like', 'love', 'hate', 'vorziehen', 'wünschen', 'lieben', 'hassen' — do not occur in German with

infinitive clause complements having an implied subject different from the subject of the matrix clause: "Ich wünsche, ins Kino zu gehen"

"Ich wünsche, dass er ins Kino geht",
i.e. they are always mono-transitive.

We turn now to a comparison of the sentence patterns from the point of view of their verb membership, i.e. the group of verbs that is able to enter each pattern. In two equivalent sets of German and English verbs, there is a considerably larger set of verbs in German than in English: in my sample it was about 850 German verbs to 600 English. The main reason for this discrepancy seems to be the incidence of prefixed verbs in German: the same verb root may occur with an array of prefixes, and each one is treated as a separate verb. In many cases the verbal prefix in German is the equivalent of the particle in an English phrasal verb. And since I have not included phrasal verbs in English, the two sets of verbs are not completely equivalent. We will look at each of the five functional groupings in turn and draw a number of comparisons.

1. Intensive patterns. The verbs taking 'current' attributes in the two languages are roughly equivalent, including items like 'seem — scheinen', 'look — aussehen', 'smell — riechen', 'sound — klingen'. But the groups taking 'resulting' attributes are vastly different. German shows only one verb of this kind: 'werden', which does service for English 'become', 'grow' ("grow cold"), 'turn' ('turn pink'), 'get', ('get warm'), 'go' ('go lumpy'). In addition to these five general verbs in this pattern, there is a significant number of verbs which seem to be restricted in the adjectives of result that may be associated with them, e.g. 'break — open', 'fold — flat', 'stretch — tight', 'wear — thin', 'wipe — clean'. In some ways these combinations are similar to the verb + particle combinations of phrasal verbs, where the particle often has a resultant meaning, cf. 'break out', 'wear out', 'wipe off'. These combinations seem to be frequently translated into German by means of prefixed verbs, e.g. "The box broke open — Die Kiste brach auf", "The clothes have worn thin — Die Kleider haben sich abgetragen".

Comparable to these last, there is a group of verbs in German which enters the pattern 'S V in-Stückes', which I have included in the sentence pattern 'S V in-NPace' (G23). It is arguable that these should more appropriately belong in the 'S V Adj result' pattern (G4). This group includes: 'bersten', 'explodieren', 'platzen', 'zerspringen'.

2. Intransitive patterns. The membership of the intransitive patterns is broadly similar, apart from three general differences that have already been mentioned: 1. the incidence in German of prefixed verbs greatly increases the
number of verbs, in this case particularly in pattern 'S V' (G5); 2. German has an extra set of patterns to account for the 'reflexive' cases, so that detailed comparison has to take the reflexive and non-reflexive patterns together; 3. the German 'S V (middle)' pattern (G6) has significantly fewer members than the equivalent English pattern (E6), because the 'S V sich' pattern (G11) is also a 'middle' pattern in German. A small number of verbs in German may form their middle voice in either G6 or G11, e.g. 'öffnen' — "Hans öffnet die Tür": "Die Tür öffnet sich"; 'enden' — "Hans endete seine Rede": "Die Rede endete".

3. Mono-transitive patterns. Again prefixed verbs inflate the number of German verbs in some patterns, particularly in the 'S V NP dat' pattern (G14). English does not have the 'S V NP dat' pattern; the corresponding verbs to those that enter this pattern in German enter either the 'S V NP' pattern (E12), e.g. 'dienen — serve', 'folgen — follow', 'gefallen — please', or the 'S V Prep-NP' pattern (E17), e.g. 'passieren — happen to', 'zählen — listen to', 'zustimmen — agree to'.

A greater number of verbs in German enters the pattern 'S V Prep-NP' (G23, E17) than in English. Comparative figures are approximately 150 German verbs to 100 English verbs. There appear to be two main explanations of this discrepancy: 1. some verbs may take a prepositional object in German that take only a NP object in English, e.g. 'machen an — paint', 'zwei an — doubt'; 2. the 'S V NP' pattern may be more common for the English equivalent and/or the German verb may allow only a prepositional object, e.g. 'fortfahren in/mit — continue (in/with)', 'zusammen treffen mit — meet (up with)'.

Turning to the nominal clause patterns, the finite clause patterns (that-clause, dass-clause, when-clause/when-clause) have a roughly similar membership, containing verbs of mental, emotional and communicative activity. In the non-finite clauses, however, there are some interesting differences. English is richer in non-finite clauses, as we have noticed, having "ing-clauses" as well as infinitive clauses. And English seems to allow a slightly greater number of verbs in these patterns than does German, e.g. "Jim reported seeing sheep on the road" — "Er betrachtete, dass er..."; "Er regiert, dass er...". The English pattern 'S V Prep-ing-clause' (E150) is frequently translated by German patterns G13 and G14 ('S V sich da (there)/prep zu-inf-clause', e.g. "He complained about having to go to the dentist" — "Er klagte darum, zum Zahnarzt gehen zu müssen"), "He boasted about winning the race — "Er rühme sich damit, das Rennen gewonnen zu haben".

4. Di-transitive patterns. The German pattern 'S V NP dat NPace' (G44) is equivalent to English E32 and E38. Most of the verbs in these patterns are of the 'benefactive' type, i.e. they can be roughly paraphrased by 'give someone something'. German, however, has a group of 'deprivative' verbs in this pattern, including 'rauben', 'verbergen', 'versagen', 'verweigern' (English has only 'refuse') and a group of 'additive' verbs, including 'beifügen', 'beilegen', 'hinzufügen'.

The numbers of verbs in the 'S V NP Prep-NP' patterns (E33, G46) are similar, and both English and German have the problem here of deciding in many cases whether the prepositional phrase is object or adverbial. This is particularly problematic for the prepositions 'für', 'with/mit', 'to/zu'.

The general membership of the group of verbs in each language taking nominal clauses is very similar, and this applies to mono-transitive cases as well as di-transitive. Possibly there are some general kinds of meanings associated with nominal clauses which restrict their use to a particular set of verbs. The differences between the languages arise from the distribution of the verbs among the patterns.

German distinguishes a group of patterns characterised by the structure 'NPace-nom. clause' and a group by 'NP dat-nom. clause'. English has a group of 'NP prep-nom. clause' patterns and a group of 'to-NP prep-nom. clause' patterns. English allows some verbs to enter both groups, e.g. 'promise', 'show him/to him that...'. The only verb in German that allows both 'NPace' and 'NP dat' with a nominal clause is 'lehren', and that is possibly because it is in the process of changing from an NPace to an NP dat verb. The majority of verbs entering the 'NPace-nom. clause' patterns in German take prepositional objects, i.e. they enter patterns G48, G50 and G52.

The English pattern 'S V NP Prep-ing-clause' (E37) is translated either by an infinitive clause, e.g. "forbidding him for making a noise — verurteilen ihn, einen Lärm gemacht zu haben", or by a 'dass-clause', e.g. "thank him for shutting the door — danken ihm dafür, dass er die Tür zuzuschließen".

5. Complex-transitive patterns. We have already noticed that German shows a paucity of cases in this group with infinitive clauses. The remainder of the complex-transitive patterns comprises those with two NPs in an intensive relationship (Object + Object Complement). The second NP in German is sometimes introduced by a preposition ('als', 'für', 'zu'); English also has 'as', though it is often interchangeable with NP, e.g. "I regard him (as) a friend" — "Ich betrachte ihn als einen Freund".

The 'S V NP Adj. result' pattern in English (E48), like the 'S V Adj. result' pattern (E2), contains a number of verbs not contained in the equivalent German pattern (G64) that take a limited number of adjective complements similar in function to particles in phrasal verbs, e.g. 'hammer - flat', 'pack - full', 'push - open'. Again these seem to be translated into German mostly by prefixed verbs, e.g. 'vollpacken', 'aufatmen'.
It remains for me to give some indication of what application the contrastive information contained in the foregoing might have. I have been presenting two kinds of contrastive information: on the one hand I have been comparing the basic sentence patterns of the two languages; on the other I have been comparing individual verbs or groups of verbs. That is to say, there is some information that is relevant to syntax, and some that is relevant to the lexicon.

The syntactic information indicates what differences there are between German and English in the nature and range of sentence patterns, and in addition which sentence patterns are broadly equivalent between the two languages. The lexical information indicates differences in syntactic operation between equivalent lexical items (verbs) in the two languages, information that one might reasonably expect to find in a bilingual dictionary.

My contention is, therefore, that the kind of information that I have been discussing should have its place in the reference grammar and pedagogical grammar, and in the bilingual dictionary, which are the handbooks of the language practitioner.

APPENDIX

ENGLISH SENTENCE PATTERNS

1. S V Adj. current
   He looks tired
2. S V Adj. result
   The milk turned sour
3. S V NP. current
   He seems an intelligent man
4. S V NP. result
   She became a nurse
5. S V
   Who's coughing?
6. S V (middle)
   The door opened
7. S V A place
   They live in Birmingham
8. S V Direction
   He rode into town
9. S V Amann
   These children behave badly
10. S V A Quant
    The performance lasted three hours
11. It V?
12. S V NP
13. S V NP (S)
14. S V NP (reciprocal)
15. S V NP cognate
16. S V NP result
17. S V Prep-NP
18. S V NP Aplace
19. S V NP Adirection
20. S V NP Amann
21. S V NP A time
22. S V NP A quant
23. S V that-clause
   He demanded that you should visit him

GERMAN SENTENCE PATTERNS

1. S V Adj. current
   Er sieht krank aus
2. S V Adj. result
   Die Kleider wurden schmutzig
3. S V NP. current
   Sie bleibt Schullehrerin
4. S V NP. result
   Er wurde Ingenieur
5. S V
   Er ging weg
6. S V (middle)
   Das Holz brennt an
7. S V Aplace
   Er wohnt bei seinem Onkel
8. S V Adirection
   Sie fährt ins Wasser
9. S V Amann
   Er handelt vorsichtig
10. S V Aquant
    Das Kind misst 75 cm
11. S V sich
12. S V sich Adv
13. Er V...
14. S V NPace
15. S V NP (S)
16. S V NP (reciprocal)
17. S V NP cognate
18. S V NP result
19. S V NP dat
20. S V sich NPace

You can depend on it that I'll be there
I wonder why he hasn't come
He doesn't bother about who comes
He wants to write a book
They suggested going to the theatre
My shoes need mending
He believes in getting up early
It surprised me that he knew so much
Could you lend me a pen?
This episode robbed him of his position
We told him that they had failed
She asked him whether he knew the song
I advised him to give her an apple
They accused her of stealing the money
I gave the books to Jim
He mentioned to us that it was over
She confessed to us why she had gone
She complained to us about his conduct
They watched us cross the road
We made them eat it up
They intend us to wait a long time
They rely on us to tell him
They discovered her playing the flute
I find him amusing
He painted the door blue
I consider him an honest man
They elected Jim chairman

Er konnte auf das, daß ich kommen werde
Ich wundere mich, warum er nicht kommt
Er kümmert sich nicht um, wer kommt
Er will schreiben
Sie schlugen vor, ins Theater zu gehen
Meine Schuhe benötigen eine Reparatur
Er glaubt an, früh aufzustehen
Es überraschte mich, daß er so viel wußte
Könnten Sie mir ein Bleistift leihen?
Diese Episode nahm ihm seine Stellung
Wir erzählten ihm, daß sie gescheitert waren
Sie fragte ihn, ob er das Lied kannte
Ich empfahl ihm, ihr ein Apfel zu geben
Sie beschuldigte sie des Diebstahls
Ich gab die Bücher ihm
Er erwähnte uns, daß es vorbei war
Sie gestand uns, warum sie gegangen war
Sie klagte uns über seinen Verhalten
Sie beobachteten uns, als wir die Straße überquerten
Wir machten sie essen
Sie planen, uns zu warten
Sie vertrauen uns, uns zu sagen
Sie fanden sie beim Flötenspielen
Ich fand ihn lustig
Er malte die Tür blau
Ich betrachte ihn als einen ehrlichen Mann
Sie wählten Jim zum Vorsitzenden
Er hat sich ausgesetzt
Er hat sich des Ursprungs erinnert
Wir warteten auf einen Brief
Er befasst sich mit dem Problem
Wir ließen ihn in Ruin
Sie stellte die Tasse auf den Tisch
Er hat sie gut behandelt
Ich schmale ihm 20 Pf.
Ich erwartete, dass nichts passiert
Er hat davon gesprochen, dass...
Wir bilden uns ein, dass alles schief geht
Wir argern uns darüber, dass...
Ich fragte, ob er kommen konnte
Es kostet mehr als, wie...
Sie erklärten sich, ob der Zug fährt
Sie streiken sich darüber, ob...
Sie wünscht ihren Bruder zu sprechen
Er bestellt darauf, morgen frei zu bekommen.
Ich erwärmte es nicht, ins Kino zu gehen
Er weigerte sich, etwas zu sagen
Er eignet sich nicht dazu...
Es schmerzt mich, dass er gestorben ist
Sie lachte ihn ein neues Lied
Sie hat mir einen Brief geschrieben
Man beschuldigte ihn des Diebstahls
Er fragte mich nach meinem Namen
Sie lehrte uns, dass das Fleisch böse sei
Er bedrohte das Volk damit, dass...
Wir fragten ihn, ob der Zug ankommt
Er hat mich davon informiert, war...
Ich will dich davon...
Wir danken Ihnen für den Brief
Sie antwortete ihm, dass sie nicht kam
Ich dankte Ihnen dafür, dass...
Er machte mir klar, wie der Motor startet
Er erzählte mir davon, was...
Ich empfahl dir, den Film zu sehen
Ich holte Ihnen damit...
Ich sprach mit ihm über das Wettern
Er liess den Gast eintreten
Ich finde sie schön
Sie machte das Zimmer sauber
Ich halte ihn für intelligent
Er betrachtete sie als schön
Sie machte einen Dummkopf
Ich hatte ihn für einen Ehrenmann
Man machte ihn zum König
Sie betrachtet ihn als ihren Freund

REFERENCES